

FANTASTIC

STORY MAGAZINE

JAN. 25c

ANC

featuring:

A YANK AT VALHALLA

By EDMOND HAMILTON

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FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINE

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

VOL. 5, No. 1
JANUARY, 1953

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A DEPARTMENT WHERE SCIENCE FICTION READERS AND THE EDITOR MEET

THE gap between Sunday supplement science and the more conservative pronouncements of recognized authority was never wider than in the still raging controversy over flying saucers. Some newspapers and magazines have assembled an imposing array of eyewitness testimony to give the impression that the saucers are of extra-terrestrial origin. In rebuttal, several scientists have proclaimed just as positively that flying saucers are nothing more than weather balloons, meteorites, light mirages or all three. In the middle is a group which says only that all the evidence is not in and that some instances have certainly been reported which appear to have no ready explanation on the basis of known facts.

Science fiction's own Willy Ley is among the skeptics who do not believe the saucers are extra-terrestrial. He notes the high speeds which have been reported—up to 1700 miles an hour, at which speeds the alleged saucers make 90 degree turns in any direction or stop dead.

The Big Noise

Assuming, says Mr. Ley, that an intelligent alien life form has solved the problems of inertia which would flatten any human who changed direction suddenly at that speed, there remains the matter of noise. Not engine noise. A technology capable of solving inertia can be assumed to be capable of creating a silent engine. But there is another kind of noise.

Take a large chunk of metal, such as we presume the saucers would have to be made of to traverse space. Shove it through our atmosphere at these reported speeds well above the rate of sound—what happens? Obviously you get shock waves. And with it you get enough noise to make you think the sky is falling—as it did on a certain Henny Penny, a character in an early fantasy. It is inconceivable to Mr.

Ley that a large body can be forced through our not so yielding atmosphere at these high speeds without making enough noise to be heard around the world.

Dr. Otto Struve, University of California astronomer, does not believe the saucers are vehicles directed by extra-terrestrial intelligences. There may be life on the other planets of our solar system, but it is highly unlikely that it is intelligent life. In fact only Mars appears to have some forms of life and this only a kind of lichen, one of the more primitive plant forms. Conditions on the other planets are too rugged to hold much promise.

Going outside our solar system, there is good chance that other suns may possess earth-type planets and that intelligent life might possibly have developed there. He estimates a possible 1000 planets within the galaxy which might fill all the conditions.

A Matter of Time

Could the flying saucers have come from space? Conservative scientists are not ready to accept the faster-than-light drive. They point out that the average distance of the nearer stars runs about 50,000 light years. Therefore, if there were intelligent beings on worlds of these stars and they had a technology capable of permitting them to observe earth, they would be seeing it as it was 50,000 years ago. Therefore, why should they choose this particular time (when we are apparently on the verge of space travel) to pop down and observe us? How could they have any idea of the state of affairs on earth when their information was 50,000 years old? Far from being interested in man's doings, they would be completely bored by the problems of the Neanderthal man, which is what they would see.

(Continued on page 186)

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HAVE YOU HEARD—?

A Page of News from the Science Front



MICROBES IN A CORNERSTONE may be the discovery of some future generation probing into the ruins of the New Institute of Microbiology at Rutgers University. Four microbe cultures which produce antibiotics, the wonder drugs, were first frozen, then quick-dried for preservation in the cornerstone, together with papers concerning their discovery and use. We wonder if this is another indication of a general feeling that we may be the next lost civilization.

Just recently, the oldest Indian corn pollen grains ever found were dug up 240 feet deep under Mexico City. At least 25,000 years old, they open up the possibility that men had advanced to the farming stage that far back. We hope that 25,000 years from now our descendants will not be amazed to learn that we had advanced to the antibiotic stage. . . .

THE LUMINOUS TRAIL of a meteor is now used to measure accurately the speed of winds 70 miles above the earth. As the hurricane-like winds of that altitude distort the meteor tail, photographs of it are taken every two seconds. Comparison of the photographs determine the speed of the wind.

RED BLOOD CELLS make a valuable protein food, points out Dr. Charles S. Davidson of Harvard Medical School. In the preparation of blood plasma for medical use, the red blood cells have heretofore been discarded. Dr. Davidson suggests that their protein be salvaged in the form of modified human globin, useful in cases of simple undernutrition, shock from burns, and various illnesses. The amount of such protein wasted each year, it is calculated, would keep approximately 2750 people nourished for a year. The globin can be fed, or injected into veins.

THE MOST DANGEROUS PLACE, statistics prove, is the home. And the on-

ward march of science has made it more dangerous in some ways, rather than less. Grandma didn't have to guard against such things as poisonous sprays on purchased fruits and vegetables, or "torch" sweater burns, or gas fumes, or shocks and fires from electric wiring. Grandpa didn't smoke in bed, or have to go up on the roof to repair the television aerial, or guard against slipping in the bathtub . . . there usually wasn't any bathtub.

However, there is one hazard that remains practically the same, as pointed out by Mr. John Andrews, Sanitary Engineer of the U.S. Public Health Service. He warns that dishes should be thoroughly dried before being put away, as germs left on damp dishes multiply very quickly. We think most males will agree that when there are dishes to be dried, the kitchen is a dangerous place.

AN ARTIFICIAL HEART-LUNG machine has been used successfully for 75 minutes on a human patient. During this time his blood flowed from a leg vein through the heart-lung, then returned to a vein in the patient's arm. The new machine will allow operations on either heart or lungs, and can give temporary relief in some cases of heart failure.

"**A PHANTOM LIMB**" is the medical term for the illusory sensation that an arm or leg is still there, although in reality it has been amputated. These "feelings" are now being used experimentally to control an artificial electric arm, which does what the person "feels" it is doing. Another development in electric arms is one that works on signals sent by pneumatic impulses from an insole in the shoe. These signals are picked up by a small but powerful motor in the forearm shell, which can rotate the hand, and open and close the fingers and thumb.

—Lewis Island



THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a positive demonstration that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—get across to him or her your ideas? That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby these things can be intentionally, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have

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A Yank At Valhalla

A Novel by EDMOND HAMILTON

*The gods knew a science older than man . . . but
they looked to the human intruder for salvation*

I

BRAY called excitedly to me from the forward deck of the schooner. "Keith, your hunch was right. There's something queer in this trawl."

Involuntarily I shuddered in the sudden chill of fear. Somehow I had known that the trawl would bring something up from the icy Arctic sea. Pure intuition had made me persuade Bray to lower his trawl in this unpromising spot.

"Coming, Bray!" I called, and hurried through the litter of sleds and snarling dogs.

Our schooner, the sturdy auxiliary ice-breaker *Peter Saul*, was lying at anchor in the Lincoln Sea, only four

"These are the storm-cones which
I long ago devised," Loki stated



hundred miles south of the Pole. A hundred yards away, the dazzling white fields of ice stretched northward—a vast, frozen, scarcely explored waste.

When we had reached the ice-pack the night before, I had somehow conceived the idea that Bray, the oceanographer, ought to try his luck here. Bray had laughed at my hunch at first, but had finally consented to give it a try.

"Are you psychic, Keith?" he demanded. "Look what the trawl brought up!"

A heavy, ancient-looking gold cylinder, about eight inches long, was sticking out of the frozen mud. On its sides were engraved a row of queer symbols, almost worn away.

"What in the world is it?" I breathed. "And what are those letters all over it?"

Halsen, a big, bearded Norwegian sailor, answered me.

"Those letters are in my own language, sir."

"Nonsense," I said sharply. "I know Norwegian pretty well. Those letters are not in your language."

"Not the one my people write today," explained Halsen, "but the old Norse—the rune writing. I have seen such writing on old stones in the museum at Oslo."

"Norse runes?" I blurted. "Then this must be damned ancient."

"Let's take it down to Dubman," Bray suggested. "He ought to be able to tell us."

Dubman, the waspish little archaeologist of the expedition, looked up in annoyance from his collection of Eskimo arrowheads when we entered. Angrily he took the cylinder and glared at it. Instantly his eyes lit up behind the thick spectacles.

"Old Norse!" he exclaimed. "But these are runes of the most ancient form—pre-Valdstenan. What is it?"

"Maybe the runes on it can give us a clue," I said eagerly.

"I'll soon find out what they mean," Dubman declared.

WITH a magnifying glass, he began to examine the symbols graven on the golden cylinder. I felt queerly taut. I could not understand just why I was so excited about this find, but everything about it had been queer. A persistent inner voice had kept telling me: "Make Bray let down his trawl here!" And the first time it was lowered, it had brought up a gold tube that must have lain on the sea-floor for centuries.

"Got it!" Dubman stated, looking up. "This thing is old, all right—the most ancient form of runic. The translation doesn't tell much. Listen to this."

Rune key am I,
Chaining dark evil,
Midgard snake, Fenris,
And Loki, arch-devil.
While I lie far,
The Aesir safe are,
Bring me not home,
Lest Ragnarok come.

A chill rippled through me, as though even the translation of those ancient runes could terrify me. Impatiently I shook off the feeling.

"What does all that stuff about Aesir and Loki mean?" I asked.

"The Aesir were the ancient Norse gods, eternally youthful and powerful. Ruled by Odin, they lived in the fabled city of Asgard. Loki turned against them. With his two familiars, the monstrous wolf Fenris and the great Midgard serpent, Loki joined the Jotuns, the giant enemies of the gods. The gods finally managed to chain Loki, his wolf and his serpent. But it was predicted that if Loki ever broke his bonds, that would bring about Ragnarok—the doom of the Aesir.

"Bring me not home, Lest Ragnarok come,'" he quoted. "This key claims to be one with which Loki and his pets were locked up. Probably some ancient Norse priest made it to 'prove' the old myths, was shipwrecked and lost it in the sea."

"I don't get it," Bray complained. "What made you tell me to let down my trawl in just that spot, Keith?"

When I picked up the gold cylinder, a current of queer power ran up my arm. Somehow it seemed to warn me to drop it back into the sea. But I didn't obey, for something alien commanded me to keep the rune key.

"May I study this for a few days?" I asked. "I'll take good care of it."

"I didn't know you had archaeological tastes, Masters," Dubman said, astonished. "But you were responsible for finding it, so you can keep it a while. Don't lose it, though, or I'll skin you."

Through the little ring on one end of the cylinder I passed a cord and hung it

But I worked twice as hard as anybody else, unloading our small rocket plane for my first reconnaissance flight northward. Not even intense physical labor could make me forget the sinister cold force of the rune key inside my shirt, though.

The menacing current felt even stronger when I stood on deck that night. Overhead, the aurora borealis pulsated in shifting bars and banners of unearthly radiance, changing the immense frozen ocean from white to green, violet and crimson. Like a mad musician, the freezing wind strummed the

Twilight of the Gods

IF YOU are a normally disillusioned human, you no longer expect to realize your deepest and most secret dreams. Or, you suspect that if you realized them the reality would turn out to be quite different—and probably disappointing—from the dream. But the dreams persist, even to the point (as in the Biography of James Branch Cabell) of insisting that the dream is more important than the reality, since without the dream, Man is nothing. All of which has given rise to a lot of fine literature. But here is the story of a man who achieved the ultimate—he reached Valhalla and walked with the gods. What did he make of it? You shall see, all done in Ed Hamilton's fine swashbuckling style.

—The Editor

around my neck. It was cold against my skin—cold and menacing, persistently warning. . . .

NATURALLY I tried to convince myself that I just wasn't the superstitious type. Besides my thirty years of disciplining myself to examine even obvious truths, and my towering height of lean muscle, I have inherited the canny skepticism of my Scottish ancestors. Anyhow, a scientist couldn't admit the existence of the supernatural. Like most other physicists, I claimed there were still a lot of forces which science hasn't yet had time to investigate. When it does, there will be no room for superstition, for belief in the supernatural is merely ignorance of natural laws.

schooner's halyards and made the masts boom out their deep voices.

But the rune key under my shirt tormented me with its conflicting demands. It ordered me to throw it back to the icy waters. Helpless, I ripped it out and tugged at the cord, trying to snap it. An even stronger command made me put it back.

The moment I buttoned my shirt, I cursed myself for being a fool. Why should I want to destroy something of potential value to science? Inwardly, though, I realized that the demands of the rune key were stronger than my own will.

"It can be explained scientifically," I muttered uneasily. "Everything has a scientific explanation, once we can isolate it."

But how could a small, golden cylinder penetrate my mind and order it about like a servant? What filled my heart with doubt and dread?

For all my canny skepticism and scientific training I couldn't answer those insistent questions, nor keep myself from being tormented by the damned thing. . . .

It was a brilliant arctic morning. The sun glittered on the white ice-pack, the placid gray sea and the battered hull of the *Peter Saul*. I was ready for my first reconnaissance flight northward. Doctor John Carrul, chief of the expedition, called down to me from the rail of the schooner.

"Don't go too far the first trip, Masters. And return at once if the weather grows threatening."

"There won't be any storms for days," I replied confidently. "I know arctic weather."

"You'd better leave that rune key with me," Dubman shrilled. "I'd hate to lose it if you cracked up."

During the past few days the golden cylinder hadn't been out of my thoughts. Whatever menacing force radiated from the key, it was still far beyond my science. I had tested it with electroscopes, but they registered nothing. Yet it did radiate some disturbing force. It was the same with the mental command that fought the one which tried to make me throw the key away. Apparently supernatural or not, it had to have some rational, mundane explanation.

My obsession with the mystery had made me read Dubman's books on old Norse myths. The Aesir, said the legends, inhabited the fabled city of Asgard, which was separated from the land of Midgard by a deep gulf that was spanned by a wonderful rainbow bridge. All around Midgard lay the frozen, lifeless waste of Niffleheim.

In the great hall of Valhalla reigned Odin, king of the Aesir, and his wife, Frigga. And in other castles dwelt the other gods and goddesses. Once Loki

had been of the Aesir, till he turned traitor and was imprisoned with his two monstrous pets, the wolf Fenris and the Midgard serpent lormungandr.

I read about the Jotuns—the giants who lived in dark Jotunheim and incessantly battled the Aesir. Then there were the dwarfs of Earth, the Alfings who dwelt in subterranean Alfheim. Hel, the wicked death-goddess whose dreaded hall was near the dark city of the Jotuns. Muspelheim, the fiery realm beneath Midgard. . . .

II

NE thing in these legends impressed me. They depicted the Aesir as mortal beings who possessed the secret of eternal youth in common with the giants and dwarfs. None of them grew old, but any of them could be slain. If Loki were released, bringing about Ragnarok—the twilight of the gods—the Aesir would perish.

As I delved into the books of Rydberg, Anderson and Du Chaillu, I learned that ethnologists thought there was some real basis to these legends. They believed the Aesir had been real people with remarkable powers.

All my reading had only intensified my interest in the enigmatic rune key from the sea. I knew it bordered on superstition, but I felt that if I were away from the influence of others, the damned thing might actually get coherent.

"I'll be back by four o'clock," I said. "It won't take me long to map a sled route."

"Be sure you take no chances," called Dr. Carrul anxiously.

Streaking across the ice, the rocket plane roared into the chill air. I circled above the schooner, climbed higher, and then headed northward across the ice-pack. Within ten minutes, I was flying over the endless expanse of the frozen Arctic Ocean, warm and snug in the oxygen-filled cabin.

A vast white plain, glittering like

diamonds in the sunlight, the sea ice had jammed and split, and there were long leads of open water. My mission was to chart the easiest route toward the Pole, so the sleds would lose no time detouring around leads or scrambling over ridges. Once a weather observation camp was established, I would carry it supplies in the plane.

Hundreds of thousands of square miles of the enormous sea of ice had never been seen by man. Earth's last real home of mystery was dazzlingly beautiful—but it was murderous, terrifying, sinister. . . .

Absorbed in keeping the plane on its course and making a map of the ice below, my sense of time was temporarily paralyzed. The rocket motor roared tirelessly, and the ice unrolled endlessly below. When my ship lurched sharply, I abruptly realized that the wind was suddenly rising. I looked around, startled. A huge dark wall was rising across the southern horizon.

"Damn it, I'll never call myself a weather prophet again," I swore. "There just couldn't be any storm. But there it is!"

I banked around sharply and flew southward, fighting to rise above the fury. But the higher I climbed, the higher the black, boiling wall of the storm seemed to rise. I was caught.

"Two minutes to live," I gritted. "It'll be a fast death—"

Driving before it a cloud of stinging snow, the storm smacked my plane like a giant hand. Stunned by the impact, deafened, I swung the nose around and let the wind sweep the plane northward. There was no hope of fighting. I could only run before the gale until its fury subsided. The whole sky was dark and raging around me, filled with screaming wind and snow. Gripping the firing wheel, I battled to keep the reeling plane in the air.

BUT why did the rune key inside my shirt seem to throb with frantic warning? Why did that alien voice in

my mind seem eager and exultant? Why did I feel there was something purposeful about this gale's direction? The storm had come up suddenly out of a clear sky as soon as my plane was well in the air. Now it was hurling me straight in one direction.

The imminent peril of death grew less unnerving than the mounting suspicion that there was something deliberate about the storm. The warning force throbbing from the rune key and the wildly exultant alien voice in my brain combined to demoralize me.

After nearly six hours of ceaseless storm-driven flight, I received the greatest shock. Peering ahead through the frosted cabin windows, I realized suddenly that there was a great area dead ahead—which I could not see!

"It can't be real!" I gasped. "A colossal blind spot—"

My vision seemed to slide around that vast area. I could see the ice-pack beyond it, scores of miles away. I could see the ice on either side of it. But the area itself just didn't register.

"Some trick of refraction, perhaps due to the terrestrial magnetic currents that are strong here," I muttered. "Maybe it's connected with the mystery of the aurora."

My scientific reasoning didn't quiet my nerves. For the storm that bore me on was carrying me straight toward that huge blind spot. When I was almost to the edge of the enigmatic area, my vision seemed to slide away to either side, almost at right angles. If this was refraction, it was a type that was completely unknown to science.

My storm-tossed plane hurtled with reckless speed toward the edge of the vast blind spot. I could see nothing whatever ahead. Everything seemed crazily twisted out of focus, distorted by that weird wall.

Abruptly the gale flung my reeling plane directly through the fantastic wall that defied my vision—and I was inside the blind spot! But now I could not see outside it.

"This—this is impossible!" I gasped with startled terror.

I could see nothing but the interior, a great space of tossing ocean, curving ominously to every sinister horizon. Black waves, black clouds . . . Suddenly I gasped in amazement. Far ahead loomed a long, high mass of forbidding dark land.

The storm still howled with all its original fury, carrying me dangerously low over the foam-fanged waves toward the distant land. Through the scudding snow, I detected a faint greenish radiance. But realization of my immediate peril swept away my demoralization. I could not land in that vicious sea. Yet neither could I climb again in that gale.

The land I had glimpsed was now a mile ahead of me, its frowning eastern cliffs stretching right across my course. The gray precipices were hundreds of feet high. Above them, the land ran back into dark forests and shaggy, wooded hills where no landing was possible. Then I saw a small beach strewn with boulders. Pure desperation made me head the plane toward it.

OVER the boiling white hell of breakers I shot. My wheels touched the beach. Before I could break with the forward jets, the port window smashed against a projecting boulder. But that was the only damage when I stopped out of reach of those clutching waves.

I shut off the rocket motor and stumbled out of the ship. My knees were trembling with the reaction of prolonged tenseness. But the land and sea inside the incredible blind spot made me forget my exhaustion.

The air was keenly cold. It was the cold of an ordinary northern spring, though not the bitter polar chill it should have been. The sky was dark with clouds fleeing before the gale. The boom of raging surf and keen of wailing winds were loud in my ears. Stranger even than the comparative warmth was the faint green radiance that seemed to pervade the air. An eldritch glow that

could barely be seen, it seemed to stream upward from the ground. It was oddly exhilarating.

"Might be gamma radiations from some unknown source," I reasoned. "That may account for the refraction that makes this whole area a blind spot. I wish I had instruments here to check. Hope it doesn't have the usual effects of gamma radiation on human tissue. But it seems invigorating."

Excitement began to rise in me. I had found a hidden land of strange warmth completely unknown to the civilized world, here in the polar wastes. Its strange trick of refraction had defied discovery until now. No scientist could have been dropped in that blind spot without feeling the urge to explore. Waiting for the storm to die down, flying out of the blind area and getting back to the ship for a regular exploration party would have been wiser. But like every other man, I had the desire to be the first in an unknown land.

I moored the plane between two boulders and removed my flying togs to don regulation exploring clothes for Arctic weather. With a pack of food pellets and blankets on my back, I began to climb the jagged, craggy wall.

Gasping for breath, I reached the rim of the lofty cliffs. Cold sea winds buffeted me, and the boom of bursting breakers came strangely muted from below. Harshly screaming sea-gulls soared and circled around me.

To my right lay the edge of the cliffs. To my left, a strip of heather ended in a forest of fir trees, bending in the wind. Beyond the dark fir forest, shaggy, wooded hills rose steeply. Toward the south lay the greater part of the land, rising into higher forested hills. It was a wild northern landscape, bleak, harsh, inhospitable. Yet somehow I relished being alone among screaming winds and gulls and booming surf and groaning trees.

I stared at the towering little island I had glimpsed. Its cliffs rose sheer from the green sea for a thousand feet. Its

flat top was on a level with the mainland and separated from it only by a narrow, deep chasm through which the ocean surged.

But upon the is'land itself rose massed gray towers—buildings! Great castles stood out boldly against the gray, tossing sky grouped into an amazing city on the small plateau. From the island to the mainland sprang the arch of a stupendous bridge. The flying bow of stone soared up and out for hundreds of feet. Painted in brilliant red and blue and yellow, it gleamed like a fixed rainbow.

A rainbow bridge, leading to the high eyrie of great gray castles. Into my mind rushed the stupefying memory of the legends I had read so recently—Asgard, the fabled city of the Norse gods—the rainbow bridge that connected their abode with Midgard.

Was I looking upon the city of the Aesir? Impossible! Yet this place was real. . . .

III

ACY in the inhuman uproar startled me. I whirled around. A horse and rider were charging along the edge of the cliff, coming from the south.

"Good Lord!" I gasped. "Must everything be like a dream?"

The rider of that charging black steed was a girl, but like none I had ever seen before. She wore a winged metal helmet, beneath which her bright yellow hair streamed like flame in the wind. Blue eyes flared hatred out of a beautiful, angry face. Her dress was a gleaming *brynja*, or coat of ringed mail, over a kirtle. Her white knees were bare, gripping the saddle. As she urged her mount down upon me, a straight light sword flashed in her hand.

"You dare spy upon Asgard, Jotun dog!" she cried fiercely in a language that was remarkably close to Norwegian. "Death for that!"

Then that high eyrie of great gray castle was Asgard, home of the legen-

dary Aesir! And this wrathful Viking maid took me for a Jotun, one of the race who were mortal enemies of the Aesir! Was I dreaming all this or had I actually stumbled somehow into the land of ancient Viking legend?

Then I woke to realization of my peril. As the girl's sword stabbed toward my breast, I ducked under it. I felt the blade scream above my head as her horse thundered past. Swiftly I reached up and grabbed her outstretched mail-clad arm. My hold tore her from her saddle.

The sword flew from her grasp as she fell. But she was up and darting toward it in a single motion. I leaped after her and caught her before she could reach the weapon. She fought like a tigress. The strength of her slender, mail-clad body was amazing. Her small fist struck my mouth furiously.

"Scum of Jotunheim!" she hissed.

I finally succeeded in pinning her arms to her sides. Her white face, inches away from my own, was blazing with rage, her sea-blue eyes stormy with wild anger. She was beautiful, with a vibrant loveliness like that of a tempest. Her helmeted, golden head came only to my chin, but her blue eyes glared into mine without a trace of fear.

"You'll dangle from the walls of Asgard for daring to lay hands on me, Jotun!" she snapped.

She spoke a strangely antique form of the Norwegian tongue. I answered in the Norwegian I knew.

"Why did you try to kill me?" I asked. "I'm not your enemy."

"You are a Jotun, an enemy of the Aesir," she declared. "You have the dark hair of a true Jotun dog, even though you have chosen to dress in outlandish garments. And you dared to spy on Asgard!"

In the old legends, I remembered, the mighty Aesir had been fair-haired. Their mortal enemies, the Jotuns, had been dark-haired.

"I am no Jotun," I said earnestly. "I have but newly come to this land, from

far across the outer ice."

She laughed scornfully. "Do you think I believe that you have come from beyond frozen Niffleheim? Your lie is not even clever. Why do you delay in killing me? Death is preferable to your touch, Jotun. And the death of Freya will soon be avenged."

"Freya?" I gasped.

This girl was Freya, whom the old Vikings had worshiped—Freya of the white hands, loveliest of the Aesir? It was impossible! She was real, warm, panting with hate as she sought to free herself. Yet she had spoken of Asgard. That distant eyrie of gray castle was Asgard, just as the legends had described it, even to the flying rainbow bridge connecting it with the mainland.

"I can't understand, Freya," I faltered, still holding her. "My name is Keith Masters. I came from beyond the ice—Niffleheim, as you call it."

For a moment, doubt softened her stormy blue eyes. Then she looked past me, and they became bitter and hate-filled again.

"You need lie no longer. Here are your Jotun comrades now, come to help you."

I TURNED, appalled. Eight men were approaching stealthily, after tethering their horses at the edge of the forest. They were taller even than I. Their hair was as black as mine and hung down in shaggy locks from under cap-like metal helmets. They wore armor tunics of overlapping metal scales, and high buskins on their feet, and carried swords and shields. Their faces were black-bearded, brutal.

"He is the man—kill him!" a brawny man bellowed, pointing to me with his sword.

They rushed forward. Freya's sword lay near my feet. I released the girl and snatched up the weapon. As I faced the Jotuns, I glimpsed Freya staring in wonder from me to the charging barbarians. I heard their captain shouting orders.

"Strike them both down. Be sure the man does not escape!"

They came at me in a bunch. The light, straight sword in my hand flashed out viciously. I was a fair hand with a saber, for it was a sport I had practised in university days. Except for its straightness, this sword was like the blades I had used.

It bit through a Jotun throat, then swung in a slicing slash at his nearest comrade's neck. Both men crumpled, but the others came on. I knew I was done for. Real life isn't like the movies. One man just can't stand off six in a sword fight.

"We are at the edge of the cliff," Freya said calmly. "Another step backward and we fall."

"Take care not to push the man over the cliff," shouted the Jotun captain apprehensively. "We must not lose his body!"

Whatever its reason, their caution gave me a chance I would not have had otherwise. I stood up against their stabbing blades, fending off savage thrusts. But such a battle could not go on for long. Already my arm was tiring, and I was exhausted by all I had gone through.

"He weakens!" roared the Jotun captain. "Thrust home!"

At that moment, I heard a thunder of approaching hoofs.

"Help comes!" cried Freya. "My kinsman and the Jarl Thor!"

The Jotun warriors stopped and swung around. A bellow of rage and terror went up from them. Two riders were charging toward us from Asgard, followed by a hurrying troop. One was a helmeted, gold-haired man, whose handsome face was wild with anger. The other's face was red, and his small eyes were blazing. His yellow beard bristling, he swung a huge hammer that to me seemed his only weapon.

"The Hammerer!" cried the Jotuns.

They bolted in frantic fear toward their horses. But they were too late. A terrible bull-roar of rage came from the



"Here are your comrades now," she said, "come to help you"

bearded bare-headed giant. His huge hammer smashed a Jotun's helmet and skull like cardboard. Without slackening his horses's stride, the gigantic Hammerer swung his awful weapon at another Jotun's head.

"It's the Jarl Thor and my kinsman Frey," Freya stated coolly.

Thor, mightiest of the old gods of legend, strongest of the Aesir? Frey, the mythical kinsman of Freya? I shrugged in defeated skepticism.

None of the fleeing Jotuns reached their horses. The lightning-like sword of Frey stabbed two as they ran, and the terrible hammer of the bearded Thor

smashed down the others. Then Thor and Frey wheeled their horses. The Hammerer uttered another roar of rage and spurred straight at me.

"Here's a Jotun dog we missed!"

BEFORE I could move, his great hammer, bright-red with new blood, was already raised. I swayed drunkenly, exhausted, unable to defend myself from that terrible weapon.

"Wait!" Freya cried.

The hammer was checked in midair. No ordinary man could have halted its downward rush so effortlessly.

"Is he not one of the Jotun *skrellings*

who attacked you?" rumbled Thor.

"He cannot be," Freya said. "For they tried even harder to kill him than me, and he fought valiantly against them."

Frey hurriedly dismounted. His handsome face was drawn with worry as he ran to the girl and caught her shoulders.

"You're not harmed, Freya?" he asked anxiously.

"No, by the help of this outlander," she said, "Jarl Keith is his name, and he says he came from beyond Nifflheim."

"It's true," I panted. "I came in that flying ship."

I pointed to the beach far below, where my rocket plane rested between the boulders. They stared down at it.

"So you outlanders can build flying ships," Frey said wonderingly. "Your civilization must be far different from ours. Odin will wish to question this outlander. We'll take him to Asgard with us."

Odin, chief of the old Norse gods, king of the mythical Aesir? I shook my head and gave up the fight against disbelief.

"Very well," growled Thor reluctantly. "I still think he looks like a Jotun."

Frey brought me the horse of a dead Jotun. By now, the troop that had hurried after Frey and Thor reached us. They were all big, fair-haired men, armored in mail *brynjas* and helmets, obviously disappointed at missing the fight.

I mounted, unable to lose the dream-like quality of the experience. With the troop of horsemen following, I rode beside Freya, Thor and Frey. I heard the clatter of hoofs, the rumble of voices, felt the saddle beneath me, and the motion of the horse. But nothing seemed real. My body grasped the actuality, yet my tired, harried brain refused to accept it. My eyes were so puzzled and shot with blood that Freya looked at me sympathetically.

"You can rest in Asgard, Jarl Keith,"

she said. "And you have nothing to fear from my people."

"I do not fear," I answered thickly, "but my dazed mind makes me unhappy. Are you people really the old gods?"

"Gods?" she repeated. "I do not understand you, Jarl Keith. There are no gods, except the three Norns and their mother, Wyrd, whom we worship."

I clenched my teeth and stared straight ahead. If they weren't the ancient Norse gods, why did they give themselves, their city, the lands around them, the names I had found in the legends? On the other hand, it couldn't be a fake, for they seemed genuinely bewildered by me and my questions. Naturally they might have been fairly recent immigrants to this weird blind spot, perhaps the tenth or fifteenth generation. In that case, they wouldn't be immortals, of course, and there would be a perfectly reasonable explanation for their names and those of their city and surroundings.

But would recent colonists dare the vengeance of their gods by taking their names? I had to change that question when another thought struck me. Even if the colony were thousands of years old, there would still be some remembrance of the Aesir—the old gods! But these people worshiped the Norns and their mother, Wyrd, which meant they were not gods and did not regard the Aesir as supernatural beings.

Defeatedly I stopped thinking when we reached the rainbow bridge. Five hundred feet long, it consisted of brilliantly painted slabs of stone, laid across two huge arched beams of massive silver metal. Far beneath this giddy span, the green sea rolled between the promontory and the island, Asgard. My scalp tingled as we rode our horses up the arch. Their hoofs clattered on the stone, proving the solidity of the bridge. But I shrank from looking over either side, for there were no railings or low walls. But neither the Aesir nor our horses showed the slightest apprehension.

Bifrost Bridge hung in the sky like a rainbow frozen into stone. And I, Keith Masters, with Thor, Frey and Freya of the old Aesir, was riding across it to Asgard, mythical city of the gods!

IV

THE bridge ended in a massive guard-house of gray stone, built sheer on the precipitous edge of Asgard. The only entrance to the city beyond was by an arched way through the fort, which was barred by metal gates. But as our horses clattered over the stupendous bridge, a guard blew a long, throbbing call on a great horn that hung in a sling.

Our horses paused. Warily I glanced down into the abyss and looked at the island more closely. I noted that in the eastern cliffs was a deep fjord with a narrow entrance in which floated several dozen ships. Dragon-ships like those of the old Vikings, they were forty to eighty feet long, with brazen beaks on their bows and sails furled and oars stacked. From the fjord, a steep path led upward to the plateau.

In answer to the blast on the horn, a tall, lordly man in gleaming mail and helmet came out on the tower above.

"Open wide your gates, Heimdall!" boomed Thor impatiently. "Are we to be kept waiting here till we rot?"

"Softly, Thor," Frey said to the Hammerer. "It was Heimdall, remember, whose keen eyes saw Freya and the Jotuns and warned us."

Heimdall, the warden of the guardhouse, waved his hand to us. Winches groaned, and the barred gates swung inward. We spurred forward. I was glad to leave that unrailed bridge over the abyss. We rode right through the arched tunnel that pierced the guardhouse and clattered onto a stone-paved plaza.

Asgard lay before me. . . .

Involuntarily I slackened my bridle and stared at the great gray castles that were built in a ring around the sheer edge of the lofty island. All twenty had

been built of gray stone hewn from the rock of the island itself, and all were tiled with thin stone slates. Each consisted of a big, rectangular, two-storied hall, with two branching lower wings and two guard-towers. They faced toward a far huger pile that rose from the center of the island.

The largest castle had four guard-towers, and its vast, stone-tiled roof loomed over the rest of Asgard like a man-made mountain. Between this great hall and the ring of smaller castles lay small fields and cobbled streets of stone houses and workshops.

Hundreds of the people of Asgard were in the streets and fields. All were fair-haired, blue-eyed and large-statured. Many of the men wore helmets and mailed *brynjas*, and were armed with sword, ax or bow. Other men wore metal rings around their necks, but they went about their tasks cheerfully. The women wore long blue or white gowns with wimpled hoods. There were scarcely any children.

"Must be an unbelievably low birth-rate here," I muttered. "That could be due to the hard radiation effect."

The faint, eldritch green glow pervaded this island, like the mainland. It was certainly exhilarating. It was restoring my vigor with amazing speed. But if it was actually gamma or a similar hard radiation, as I suspected, it would be bound to cause a partial sterility among people who were continually exposed to it.

We spurred toward the central castle, halted our horses on a stone plaza guarded by a file of soldiery.

"This is Valhalla, the castle of our king," Freya told me as we dismounted. "Courage, Jarl Keith. Odin will explain all to you."

The touch of her slim white fingers seemed to steady me. Valhalla, the legendary gathering hall of the gods, had stunned me. I grinned weakly and followed Thor as he clanked through the arched entrance and strode down a stone corridor into a vast hall.

The place was two hundred feet wide and six hundred feet long! Ninety feet above us were the great beams that supported the enormous gabled roof. Narrow, slitlike windows admitted too little light to dispel the shadows, but I could see that the walls were hung with brilliant tapestries. The stone floor held massive tables and benches.

IN THE center was a great sunken hearth, where a few dying brands still smoldered. Facing this, on a raised stone dais against the south wall, sat Odin, king of the Aesir. He was wrapped in a blue-gray mantle, and wore a gleaming eagle-helmet. Thor led our little group across the shadowy hall and raised the hammer in salute.

"Hail, king and father! The Jotuns dared to attack the lady Freya. Frey and I killed the *skrellings* and have brought this man. He looks a Jotun to me, but he claims he is an outlander."

Freya stepped forward, her slim figure martial in her gleaming white mail, her beautiful white face wrathful.

"Thor is stupid as ever, Lord Odin! Anyone can see this man is an outlander from beyond Niffleheim."

"Let the man speak for himself," Odin said in a heavy, rolling voice.

The king of the Aesir seemed to be a powerful, vigorous man of about fifty years of age. His short beard was gray. His left eye was missing, destroyed by the accident or battle that had also left a white scar on his face. But he radiated such a deep, stern power and wisdom that I felt like a child before him.

"You say you came from beyond Niffleheim?" he asked.

"Yes, Lord Odin," I answered unsteadily. "I was traveling over that icy waste in my flying ship. A storm caught me and flung me far north, toward this strange land which I could not even see until I was hurled into it."

"So the outland peoples have been learning science?" Odin asked thoughtfully. "It must be so if they can build flying craft."

"Yes, and I am one of the scientists of my people," I said. "Yet I cannot understand this strange land. It cannot be seen from outside. It is warm compared with the polar cold outside, and it seems flooded with some mysterious force."

"If you cannot understand these things," Odin rumbled, "then the science of your outland people cannot be as deep as our ancient one."

I was more stunned than ever. The Aesir seemed utterly without modern scientific tools, weapons and instruments, yet their ruler was calmly depreciating the science of the modern world.

"I cannot understand you, Lord Odin!" I burst out. "Asgard, all the Aesir, and the Jotuns have been deemed but legend for many centuries. Yet in this hidden land I find you have the names of the old gods and have called your city Asgard. Most of all, I do not understand why you speak of the science of my race as though you knew a much deeper science. I have seen no evidences of scientific knowledge in this land at all!"

"Outlander, who call yourself Jarl Keith," Odin replied, "we Aesir are men, not gods. But we have lived for many centuries in Asgard, and many legends have arisen about us in the outer world."

"You've lived here for *centuries*?" I gasped incredulously. "Do you mean that you are immortal?"

"Not immortal. We can be killed by war, accident or starvation. But we do not grow old and neither do we sicken or die of disease. We do possess an ancient science, deeper and different than your outland science."

"But because it once brought us disaster, we prefer not to encourage research in it or use it in our everyday lives. We Aesir were the first civilized race of Earth. For we grew to civilization in the place where life itself first evolved—beneath the crust of Earth."

"Inside Earth?" I exclaimed unbelievingly. "Why, not one of our biolo-

gists would agree!"

"Yet it is so," said Odin broodingly. "There are great spaces beneath the crust of the planet, mighty hollows formed by its unequal cooling. It was in one of those spaces beneath this northern part of the globe that life first began. For in those hollows are great masses of imbedded radioactive elements.

"Their radiation, powerfully drenching certain compounds of carbon, hydrogen, phosphorus, sulphur and other elements which erosion carried down into the subterranean spaces, transformed those unstable compounds into new, complex chemical compounds. They never could have formed on the surface. Those organic compounds finally formed into cells capable of assimilation and reproduction.

"A rapid evolution of those first subterranean cells into more complex creatures took place. It was rapid because the penetrating radiation in that subterranean space affected the genes of all living things and caused a proliferation of mutants, a constant flood of new forms. Thus, the first living things, the first plants and insects and animals, were born beneath the Earth's crust.

"From there, they spread out into Earth's surface, and soon multiplied vastly. But evolution was more rapid in the subterranean spaces. For the gene-affecting radiation was more powerful there than on the surface. Thus, more mutants evolved there. So it was in the subterranean spaces that the first mammals and the first men evolved. Many of those men found their way out to the surface.

"They spread over Earth as wandering, half-animal savages who slowly developed through the ages. But the human beings who remained in the sheltered subterranean world developed far more swiftly. Those people had become intelligent when the men of the surface were still brutes. Those people in the underworld developed a great civilization and deep knowledge of sci-

ence. They were my people, the Aesir.

"Generations of us lived and died in the great, hollow underground world we called Muspelheim. But then our scientific progress brought catastrophe. One of our scientists, ignoring my warnings, believed that he could enable us to live indefinitely without aging or sickening.

"His theory was that by accelerating the natural disintegration of the radioactive substances in our subterranean world, they would emit a terrific flood of radiation. It would destroy all disease bacteria and deliver us from sickness. It also would constantly renew the cells in our bodies by stimulating their unceasing regeneration."

FOR a moment Odin paused, and a shudder seemed to run through all the Aesir in that great hall, Valhalla.

"Against my orders, he carried out the experiment that brought catastrophe to Muspelheim. The process got beyond his control. All the radioactive matter in our subterranean world blazed up. We Aesir fled up from our underworld to the surface. We found that the mainland yonder, which we called Midgard, was populated by two of the barbarous races of the upper Earth.

"One of those races, whom we called the Jotuns because of their great stature, were quite numerous. A people of savage, brutal warriors, lacking all learning, they dwelt in the dark city Jotunheim, which lies on the southern shore of the mainland Midgard. The other race we called the Alfings, for they were stunted men who dwelt mostly in the small caves under Midgard, through fear of the Jotuns.

"The Jotuns at first pretended friendliness toward us and learned our language. We had taken this island of Asgard for our home and had built our castles here and connected it to the mainland by the bridge Bifrost, whose beams the Alfings forged for us. Then the Jotuns suddenly unmasked their hatred and attacked us here in Asgard.

"They almost overcame us, for to sur-

prise was added treachery. But by calling upon our scientific powers, we repelled the Jotuns. Aghast at the dreadful forces our science had loosed upon them, they gladly ceased attacking us. Yet they have always hated us, and we have lived in a hostile armed truce with them for twenty centuries.

"Yes, for two thousand years have I and most of my people lived here in Asgard. The terrific blaze of radioactive fire which our rash scientist kindled in Muspelheim far below drenches all this land with penetrating radiation. Even as he had hoped, it kills all disease bacteria and rejuvenates our tissues. We do not sicken or age and can live indefinitely, unless killed in war or accident. But because the radiation had a strong sterilizing effect, our number has never increased.

"The Jotuns and Alfings, who dwell in the mainland Midgard, are also kept unaging by the radiation. And it refracts all light around the island. It also causes the northern lights that stream from this place into the skies. Here in Asgard we have lived thus for all these centuries. Though we chiefs of the Aesir retain the deep scientific knowledge we developed long ago in Muspelheim, we have chosen not to delve deeper.

"It was such delving that brought disaster to our subterranean home. We want no more such disasters! We are content to live here in simple fashion, without depending too completely on science. We know from bitter experience that science can be perverted to catastrophic results by reckless and unscrupulous men."

His heavy voice ceased. I stood staring at him, my mind dizzy. Incredible as it seemed, his story was scientifically sound. It explained nearly all the enigmas I had met in this mysterious land.

"You have lived here for centuries," I mused. "Dim rumors of your powers, your city Asgard, and your war with the Jotuns must have reached the outer world. These rumors became myths that

made you gods."

"It must be so," Odin agreed. "Long ago, a party of the Aesir went beyond the ice on an important mission. Some of them did not return. Now I believe those lost ones reached the outer world. They probably died soon, from lack of the rejuvenating radiation. But their stories of us may have begun those myths."

"So I am thought a mythical god in the outer world, eh?" Thor guffawed.

"It is true," I said earnestly. "And also Lord Odin and Frey and Freya. But there's one thing I can't understand. Those Jotuns who attacked me and Freya seemed intent on killing or capturing *me*. It was as though they expected *me* and were waiting to seize *me*. Yet how could they possibly know I was coming?"

Odin frowned. "I do not know, but I do not like it. It may be that the Jotuns—"

His voice trailed off, and he stared abstractedly beyond me. Somehow the tone of his voice had chilled me.

"But enough of that now," he said abruptly. "We shall talk later of these things and of the outer world from whence you come. Now Jarl Keith is to be an honored guest of the Aesir."

"I can't claim that title," I replied. "I am no chieftain in my own land. I'm only a scientist."

"Any man who dared Niflheim's ice has won the title of jarl," he declared. "You shall rest in this castle. And tonight, Jarl Keith, you sit with the Aesir at our nightly feast here in Valhalla."

V

SLLOWLY I awoke to the realization that a hand was gently shaking my shoulder. I saw at once that it was twilight. I had slept exhaustedly for several hours in this spacious, stone-walled room. I lay on a wooden bed whose posts were carved into wolf's heads. There were two heavy chairs with hide seats, and a big chest covered by a bril-

lant tapestry. Broad open windows looked out across the twilit city of Asgard.

The hand shaking my shoulder was that of a *thrall*. The servant, a grizzled, middle-aged man, wore the metal ring of servitude about his neck.

"The feast in Valhalla begins soon, lord," he said as I sat up. "I have brought you proper raiment."

He pointed to a helmet and garments such as the Aesir wore, which he had placed on the chest.

"All right, if I'm supposed to dress in the fashion," I said dubiously.

As he bowed and left, I went to the window. The rapidly darkening sky had partly cleared of storm clouds. In the southwest, a bloody, murky sunset glowed evilly crimson. The shaggy hills and ridges of Midgard stood out black against it.

Somewhere on the mainland, miles away at its southern end, was the dark city of Jotunheim. Somewhere in the

caves of that rocky land dwelt the dwarfed Alfings. And far below all this land, if Odin had told the truth, lay the great subterranean world of Muspelheim. There blazed the terrific atomic radiation that made this a warm country where no man could sicken or grow old enough to die.

Beneath me, as dusk fell over Asgard, I could see a cheerful bustle of activity. Armed soldiers, who had been training with sword and buckler on a near-by field, were now trooping through the twilight toward Valhalla. Smoke was rising from great castles and humble stone houses. I glimpsed hunters riding over Bifrost Bridge, the carcasses of small deer slung over their saddles. As Asgard's gates were opened, I heard the throbbing call of the warder's great horn welcoming them.

Was it possible that I was actually here in the mythical city of the gods? It certainly was hard to believe. But

[Turn page]



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even more incredible was Odin's saga. If he and the other Aesir chiefs possessed such profound scientific knowledge, why did they and all their people live so primitively?

"I suppose it's true," I muttered. "They don't age or grow sick, so they can live pleasantly enough without using science. Anyhow, they had a damned unpleasant experience with one reckless scientist. It's no wonder they don't encourage research." Slowly I shook my head. No, I told myself—I'll wake up and find it's just a dream. But I'd hate to have it disappear before I could see Freya again. Wonder if she'll be at the feast . . .

That thought spurred me into taking off my heavy coat, breeches and boots. The helmet, woolen trunks, mail coat, buskins, belt and long sword and dagger looked uncomfortably like stage props. But women are funny about unfamiliar clothing. Just think how they laugh when the telenews shows them styles they wore a couple of decades ago! I didn't want Freya to have that reaction to me.

But when I took off my own shirt to don the Aesir garments, my hand touched something that hung from my neck. It was the rune key! I had completely forgotten it since entering the blind spot. Now, however, I suddenly thought of the rune rhyme.

Rune key am I,
Chaining dark evil,
Midgard snake, Fenris
And Loki, arch-devil.

Why, I wondered, had I heard no mention of Loki? Everything else in the old Norse myths seemed to have some solid basis here, but I had heard nothing of the traitor Aesir. I decided to ask Odin about that at my first opportunity, as I tucked the gold cylinder inside my new shirt and laced up the *brynya* over it.

Hardly had I done so when the grizzled *thrall* again appeared at the door of my chamber.

"King Odin summons you to the feast, lord."

I quickly put on the heavy, gleaming helmet. Feeling stiff as a ham actor in the strange costume, I followed the *thrall* down stone stairs to the great hall. The *thrall* shouted a loud announcement.

"The Jarl Keith, from the outlands beyond Niffleheim!"

THE voices and laughter died down, and every eye turned toward me with eager curiosity. Valhalla blazed with light from torches set in the walls and the great fire blazing high in the central hearth. The scores of tables now bore metal and earthenware dishes loaded with food. Tall flagons and drinking horns were replenished by swift serving-maidens.

At these tables sat the chief captains and warriors of the Aesir. Hundreds of big, fair-haired men, helmets laid aside, their mail glistening in the torchlight, were feasting and drinking. At the table raised upon the dais by the southern wall sat the nobles of the Aesir and their ladies. In his high, carved chair in the middle sat Odin. Beside him was a woman of matronly beauty, his queen, the lady Frigga.

"Jarls and captains of the Aesir," Odin boomed, "drink welcome to the Jarl Keith, our guest and friend from beyond Niffleheim."

"Skoal to the Jarl Keith!" roared bearded Thor, winking jovially at me as he raised his huge drinking-horn.

"Skoal!" pealed Freya's silver voice.

Every voice in Valhalla hall repeated the greeting. Hundreds of drinking-horns were raised. Odin waved me toward a seat at his table of nobles, between Freya and the delicately lovely wife of Thor. As I took the chair, serving-maids brought me a great slab of beef on a platter and a horn of mead. I tasted the drink curiously. It was thin, sweet and potent.

Freya leaned toward me. She was dressed now like the other Aesir ladies, in a long white linen gown. Her bright hair was bound by a silver circlet, her

dress belted by a heavy metal girdle studded with flashing emeralds.

"Shall I name the others for you, Jarl Keith? You will meet them all soon."

At my right, beyond giant Thor and his wife, sat three other sons of Odin—Vidar, Vali and Hermod, tall and fair-haired, stalwart men all. There was Heimdall, the warden of Asgard gate, whom I had already seen. Niord was a squat, jovial bald man of middle age, with his wife Skadi. Forseti was a sober young man, apparently much respected by the other Aesir.

To my left, beyond Freya, sat Frey and his lovely wife, Gerda. Beyond them were Bragi, a gentle-looking man with dreaming eyes, his wife, the noble-featured Idun. Aegir, a gaunt, white-bearded old sea-king, and his aged wife, Ran. At the table-end sat Tyr, a young man but most gloomy and silent of any in the hall. Drinking moodily, he watched the merry feasters with brooding eyes.

"Tyr is always dark and silent," Freya explained, "but not in battle. He is a *berserk*."

I remembered the legend of the *berserks*—men who went blood-mad in battle, and fought with unhuman frenzy without mail.

"How is it that some of you are old if the radiation keeps you all from aging?" I asked.

"They were old when the catastrophe first kindled the radiation below. Since then, none of them has grown older. The few children born here grow normally till they reach maturity and then do not age further."

"You've all lived here in Asgard for centuries on centuries," I muttered. "It seems repulsive."

"Not all of us, Jarl Keith," said Freya. "I am not centuries old!"

She smiled when I looked at her doubtfully.

"Your name was known and worshiped in the outer world centuries ago, Freya."

"My mother's mother was named

Freya also," she explained. "She was sister to Frey, who sits beside you. She and her husband Odur were among the party of Aesir Odin mentioned, who perished in a mission beyond Niflheim. But Freya left two daughters, Hnoss and Gersemi. Gersemi was my own mother. She perished from drowning twenty years ago, soon after I was born."

"Then you're really only twenty years old?" I exclaimed. "I'm glad of that."

"Why should you be glad, Jarl Keith?" she asked quite innocently.

I was spared a reply by an interruption to the feast. Tall Heimdall stood up and called:

"A saga from the king of *skalds*, Bragi!"

WHEN the feasters took up the cry, Bragi rose. Smiling, he went to a great harp at the end of the hall. His fingers touched the strings, and rippling, shivering music welled out. He sang in a clear, strong voice:

Give ear, all ye Aesir,
Sons of the morning,
Wise men and warriors,
Men with great hearts!
Ye who fared upward,
From Muspelheim's fire-hell,
Daring all terrors
To seek a new land!

Bragi sang on, describing the migration of the Aesir from their disaster-smitten underworld, their repulse of the Jotuns, the hunt and the battle of their ships along Midgard's coast, and the fury of the sea.

"Skoal, Bragi!" roared the audience, and all raised their horns.

I drank with the others. The potent mead made me a little dizzy. I nearly forgot I was Keith Masters. I was the Jarl Keith, sitting beside Freya in Valhalla, feasting and shouting.

"Now for the games," Odin announced.

A gleeful yell came from the warriors.

"What games are these?" I asked.

"Sword-play with blunted blades, and wrestling," Freya said. "As a guest,

Jarl Keith, you'll take part in them, of course."

I saw everyone looking expectantly at me. Somewhat sobered, I stood up.

"I'm but a fair swordsman, Lord Odin," I said, "yet I'll join in."

"Who will try sword-play with the outland jarl?" Odin asked. "Tyr, you are our best swordsman."

"No, Lord Odin, not I," the *berserk* Tyr answered broodingly. "You know that a sword in my hand brings the madness on me."

"I'll face Jarl Keith," said Frey, standing up and smiling at me.

We walked around to the open space in front of the tables. There we were given gauntlets, shields, and two long swords whose points had been cut off.

"Who delivers three stout blows on his opponent's helmet wins the game," Odin stated.

The game appeared dangerous to me, for our faces were quite unprotected. I hadn't much hope of besting Frey, but I was determined not to show any semblance of fear before Freya and these fierce warriors.

Frey's blade clashed against mine. Next instant, I realized I could never meet his equal. Centuries of practice had made him unhumanly skillful. His blade flew like a streak of light and crashed on my helmet. As I staggered from the stunning blow, he hit my helmet again. A roar went up from the crowd. Resentment gripped me, and I lashed out savagely at Frey's head.

By sheer luck, the unexpected stroke caught his mailed shoulder. When he stumbled, I smote down on his helmet.

"Well done, Jarl Keith!" roared the bull voice of Thor.

But Frey recovered before I did. His blade became a blur of steel in front of me. Grimly I tried to hold him off. But he soon got in his third blow.

"Are you hurt, Jarl Keith?" asked Frey solicitously.

"Only my pride," I said ruefully as I put down the sword and shield.

Thor strode around the table to me.

His bearded red face and little eyes were twinkling with jovial expectation.

"You look like a wrestler, Jarl from the outlands," he boomed. "Will you try a fall with me?"

"Aye, a match between Thor and the outland jarl!" he audience shouted with mounting enthusiasm.

"Jarl Keith hasn't rested!" Freya cried indignantly to the Hammerer. "It's not fair!"

"I'm ready," I said coolly to Thor.

I REALIZED to the full that my chances of overcoming the giant were infinitesimal. But I realized, too, that all this was a kind of hazing which these Vikings gave to any newcomer. Thor tossed aside his hammer. We faced each other, hands extended, seeking a grip.

I was a fair wrestler, and I knew that my only chance was to overcome Thor by a quick trick that he might not know.

As the giant grabbed for me, I slipped past him. Leaping to his back, I got a half-nelson on him before he could expect it.

A mighty shout went up from the watchers as they saw the Hammerer claw furiously to pull me loose. Furious I hung on.

With one sturdy arm against the back of his heavily corded neck, and my legs braced, I strained to force his huge head downward. For a moment I thought I had a chance to win the match. Then a bull-roar of rage came from Thor.

He jerked his head upward with such tremendous force that my hold was torn loose.

Like an enraged bear, the Hammerer whirled and caught me around the waist.

This was wrestling in his style, all strength and little science. His huge arms crushed me, though I exerted all my strength to win free.

I felt the lacings of my mail coat burst under the pressure as I strained frantically to break his hold. But he picked me up like a child and slammed me down

upon the stone floor.

"Well done," he roared as he let me go. "You almost conquered me with your outland tricks, Jarl Keith. You will have to teach them to me."

"Some other time," I gasped, panting for breath as I stumbled to my feet. I turned toward the king. "If you are satisfied, Lord Odin, I'll take part in no more games now."

Odin smiled. "You have borne yourself well, Jarl Keith, and—"

His voice ceased as his stern face seemed to freeze.

When I saw that he was staring at my chest, I looked down. The bursting mail coat had let the rune key dangle in full view.

"The rune key!" he whispered.

Everyone in great Valhalla was speechless, staring in horror at the ancient gold cylinder that hung outside my coat.

"The rune key!" Odin repeated hoarsely. "It has come back to Asgard. This is the day for which Loki has waited!"

VI

THE frozen stillness in Valhalla was appalling. Aesir nobles and warriors all seemed turned to stone as they stared at the golden cylinder hanging from my neck. I could hear the torches guttering, the snap of logs on the blazing hearth, and the dull moan of the sea wind around Valhalla's lofty eaves. It was as though the feast of the Aesir had been smitten by chill terror.

"Where did you get that key, Jarl Keith?" Odin asked me, his voice cracking with strain.

"Why, my comrades fished it out of the sea beyond the icepack—beyond Niffleheim," I answered bewilderedly.

A deep groan went up from the entire gathering. I turned to them unhappily, feeling like a hunted animal that knows it has done no wrong, yet still is persecuted.

"Why did you bring it into this land?"

Odin demanded fiercely.

"I don't know," I blurted. Remembering the queer, alien hunch that had made me find the key, I added: "Some strange whim in my mind told me where it was and warned me not to throw it away."

"Loki's work!" Odin whispered. "The evil one has cast forces abroad that have brought back the rune key that will set him free."

Thor's face flamed crimson as he sprang to his feet, clutching his mighty weapon.

"The arch-traitor still seeks to ruin Asgard and the Aesir!" he roared in overpowering rage. "Oh, that I could bring Mjolnir down upon his skull this moment!"

"Even your strength and mighty weapon would fail against the dark science of Loki," said Odin somberly.

I looked down bewilderedly at the gold cylinder hanging on my chest. Into my mind flashed the last lines of the rune-rhyme graven on it.

While I lie far,
The Aesir safe are.
Bring me not home,
Lest Ragnarok come.

Those lines seemed to throb in my mind like a beating drum of black, dire menace that cannot be seen yet can be felt.

"I do not understand, Lord Odin," I faltered. "Have I done wrong in bringing this small and apparently harmless key into your land?"

"Because you brought it," Odin stated, calm at last, "we are threatened with doom. A terrible menace has been a shadow over us for all these long centuries. That is the key which alone can loose the evil traitor, Loki, who long has been imprisoned."

When he saw me pale at his words, his deep, heavy voice rumbled comfortingly through the frozen silence.

"It is not your fault, Jarl Keith. I see it all now. It was Loki's power that brought you and the rune key here. Yes, from the gloomy prison where his body lies helpless, Loki's mind reached

forth through his deep craft of scientific powers. He caused you to fish that rune key from the sea and raised the storm that blew you thither. Aye, and it was to take from you the key that would free their dark lord that the Jotuns attacked you when you arrived."

"But who is Loki?" I asked bewilderedly. "In the old myths of the northland, there was a tale of a traitor by that name who sought to destroy you—"

"Aye, a black traitor was accursed Loki!" shouted Thor. "The shame and curse of the Aesir, since first he was born."

"Aye, traitor he was, indeed," said Odin somberly. "Yet long ago, when we dwelt in the underworld of Muspelheim, Loki was the most honored of the Aesir next to myself. Handsome, valiant, cunning, and learned, he was second only to me among the Aesir. But Loki, the greatest scientist of my people, longed for power. His experiments endangered us all, time and again. Finally, against my orders, Loki brought catastrophe on our great and lovely underworld."

"Then Loki was the scientist you told me of!" I exclaimed. "He kindled the atomic fires of Muspelheim and nearly destroyed you!"

AT MY words a great hush fell. Then Odin nodded. "Loki was that rash scientist of whom I spoke. Seeking to kindle a radiation that would keep us ever young, he touched off atomic fires that engulfed Muspelheim and forced us to flee to this upper world. I should have punished Loki then for his reckless disobedience. But I did not, because the flood of radiation would keep us almost immortal in this land. Instead I warned him that nobody must tamper further with the raving atomic fires below.

"Loki agreed to tamper no more with those awful forces. But his promise was worth nothing. Secretly, here in Asgard, he traveled back into fiery Muspelheim and began experimenting again.

He hoped to forge such tremendous weapons from these forces that he could displace me as ruler of the Aesir and conquer all Earth. My son Baldur discovered Loki's forbidden researches in deep Muspelheim. To prevent Baldur from exposing him, Loki slew him. But he had already exposed himself.

"Loki fled from Asgard. Taking with him his two hideous pets, the wolf Fenris and the Midgard snake; he fled to dark Jotunheim. There he allied himself with the brutal Jotuns. He knew they hated the Aesir, so he incited them to attack us, promising that with his scientific powers he would help them conquer and sack Asgard.

"That was the time of which I told you, Jarl Keith, when surprise and treachery almost enabled the Jotuns to conquer us. The Jotuns, led by Loki and aided by the hellish forces his science devised, would have overcome us had I not used my own scientific powers to defeat Loki's, and had we not all fought valiantly. We repelled the Jotuns with great slaughter."

Thor grinned and nodded, but his giant face reddened with hatred as Odin continued.

"Defeated, Loki fled with his wolf and serpent into the labyrinth of caves in Midgard. We followed him to the cave in which he hid, but Loki, in this extremity, bargained cunningly for his life. Loki called out to us: 'I have an instrument which can destroy all Asgard and the Aesir, by loosing the sea upon the atomic fires of Muspelheim. Unless you agree to spare my life, I will use that secret and you will all perish with me.'

"'We agree to spare your life, Loki,' I answered. 'You have our pledge, if you surrender that deadly instrument.' Loki surrendered the instrument to me. And then I told him: 'We agreed to spare your life, Loki—but that is all! Though you shall remain alive, you will no longer be a menace to us, for we shall prison you eternally in this cave to which you fled.'

"And we did that to Loki, Jarl Keith. We cast him into a state of suspended animation by filling his cave with a gas whose scientific secret I had discovered. That gas paralyzed the functions of the body by freezing, but left the mind conscious as ever. Into that waking, frozen sleep we cast Loki and his two hideous pets. Then we closed that cave forever with a door that was not of metal or stone but of invulnerable force.

"That wall of energy was a screen of vibrations controlled by the generator inside a tiny projector. You, Jarl Keith, have that projector—the rune key! Only the rune key can unlock the door of Loki's cave-prison. Until it is unlocked, Loki must lie there with his two dreadful familiars in suspended animation.

"But though Loki's body lies frozen, his mind is awake and active, and he seeks by mental forces to free himself. We had given the wardership of the rune key to Odur, husband of Freya, one of our greatest jarls. Loki's mind worked from afar upon Odur by telepathic command, attempting to force the keeper of the key to release Loki.

"Fearing that Loki's telepathic orders might some day succeed, I commanded Odur to take the rune key and travel to the great ocean far outside icy Nifflheim and fling it into the deepest sea. Then, I thought, Loki would not be able to bring the key back to Asgard and would never manage to escape his doom. Odur took the rune key and went beyond the ice of Nifflheim and flung the key into the ocean as I bade.

"But before he could return across the ice, Odur and his wife Freya and their party were lost. I think now that they reached the lands of your outer world, and that their tales of the Aesir and Asgard started the myths you mentioned, Jarl Keith. But we thought ourselves safe, with the rune key resting in the ocean depths far outside Asgard.

"For even did a stranger chance to find the key in some future day, the runes upon it would warn him. In case he could not read the runes, the key was

constructed to telepath a constant thought message. He would receive a constant mental warning to get rid of the key."

"So that's why I felt that sensation of ominous warning, after I first touched the key!" I muttered.

"That is why," Odin replied gravely. "And yet you, Jarl Keith, were influenced by the even stronger commands of Loki. You kept the key and brought it back into Asgard. And now Loki through his allies, the Jotuns, will seek to get the rune key from us and use it to free himself. And if ever Loki is freed again, he will lead the hosts of Jotunheim once more against Asgard. And it might well be that Asgard falls, that the Aesir perish!"

I LISTENED in horror. Not for a moment did I doubt Odin was telling the truth. The ancient science of these Aesir, though neglecting mechanical discoveries for which they had little need, had clearly surpassed us in the study of the subtlest forces of the universe.

Yes, I knew now what the two contending, alien voices in my mind had been. The constant telepathic warning of the rune key projector—and the more powerful mental command of the dreaded Loki.

"I did not know, lord Odin," I declared with sincere regret. "Had I dreamed that the rune key was what it really is, I'd never have brought it here."

"You had no way of knowing, Jarl Keith," he answered. "And the attempt of Loki has failed. The Jotuns he sent to take the key failed in their task, and we still hold it."

I took the little gold cylinder from around my neck and handed it to him. The instant I parted with it, I felt relieved of that throbbing, warning sensation which had incessantly oppressed me. Odin took the key. While all in Valhalla watched, he solemnly handed it to the wide-eyed Freya.

"Your grandfather was keeper of the

key, Freya, and the office descends to you," the Aesir king stated. "You shall hold it until we take council and decide what to do with it."

"Couldn't you just destroy the thing?" I asked.

Odin shook his head. "You know little of our science, outland Jarl. The projector in the rune key maintains the energy screen that bars Loki's cave-prison. Destroying the key would destroy that screen. Let no fear enter your hearts, men of the Aesir. Loki is still imprisoned and shall remain so. Not yet has the hour come when the evil one shall escape."

A fierce roar of shouts crashed from the throng, as their swords and axes flashed high in the torchlight.

"Our swords for Asgard!"

"It is well," Odin said with somber pride. "Now let this feast of ill omen end. Heimdall, keep closest watch on Asgard's gates tonight. Loki's mind knows the key is here, and he might telepathically incite the Jotuns to attack us and secure it. And you, Frey, see that your castle is well guarded to protect your kinswoman and the key."

Freya stood fingering the cord of the rune key. She looked at me with wordless, troubled appeal as she left. I followed her into the night.

The eldritch faint green glow of the streaming, tingling radiation clung to the towering castles. No aurora was visible, for that streamed up outside the blind spot. A haggard moon was shining through flying storm clouds. The driving north wind wailed keen and cold. From far below came the dim, distant booming of the surf as the stormy ocean dashed against the cliffs. Freya turned toward me, her eyes dark and big.

"Jarl Keith, I am afraid!" she whispered. "I, who never knew fear before, am fearful now. If Loki is loosed—"

"There's no chance of that while you and your people hold the key," I encouraged her. "And even if he were set free, he is only one man."

"He is evil itself." She shuddered. "I never saw Loki. Long centuries before my birth, he was prisoned. But I have heard the tales of the other Aesir. I know that, in their secret hearts, they still dread Loki and his dark powers."

She was trembling like a wind-shaken leaf. I put my arm protectingly around her, and she shivered closer to me in the moonlight. Even the dread that I, too, was feeling could not keep my blood from racing as I looked down at her lovely face. Freya of the White Hands, daughter of the goddess of long ago, Viking maid of the Aesir—I held her in my arms!

I kissed her. . . .

As I held her close against my mail coat, the chill wind blew her bright hair across my face.

"Jarl Keith!" she whispered wonderingly.

"Freya," I breathed, "I have never loved any woman before, and I never met you until this day. But now—"

She did not answer me with words. She put her small, strong hands behind my head and drew my lips down again to hers. I felt strangely shaken when I raised my head again. We heard a cough. Frey stood in the pale light near us, regarding us with a half-smile.

"I'll go with my lady Gerda to our castle, kinswoman," he said gently. "No doubt the Jarl Keith would be willing to escort you thither."

When he and Gerda were gone, we followed slowly. My mailed arm was around Freya's slim waist as we walked through the silent, moonlit streets of Asgard. She led me toward the castle on the eastern edge of Asgard. Behind us, Valhalla towered vast and gloomy against the stormy sky. Far to our left gleamed the incredible arch of Bifrost.

"Beloved, I feel armed now against even Loki," whispered Freya happily.

"And I fear that this is a dream from which I shall awake," I breathed.

We were approaching the dark bulk of the castle that crouched squat and massive on the sheer cliff. A half dozen

blond Aesir warriors were approaching us in the moonlight. When they were but a few yards from us, they suddenly drew their swords. Their leader called to them in a fierce undertone.

"That is Freya. She has the key. Seize her, and kill the man!"

VII

THEY sprang toward us. Though stupefied by the sudden treachery of Aesir warriors, I retained enough presence of mind to draw my long sword. I pushed Freya aside, struck up a blade that was stabbing at my face. My sword sliced deep into the warrior's neck. His helmet rolled off as he fell, and his yellow hair came off with the helmet.

"These are Jotuns!" I shouted to Freya. "Run and give the alarm!"

I heard her cry pierce the night, but she did not run. A sword point grazed my shoulder through my mail. The sting made me yell with rage, and I flung myself at the disguised Jotuns. My whirling blade cut away half the face of one. Another reeled back, clutching at an almost severed arm. Then two blades crashed down on my helmet, and I collapsed to the ground.

As I fought to rally my senses, I glimpsed the disguised Jotuns dragging Freya, struggling like a wildcat, toward the cliff. The last thing I remembered was trying to rise. . . .

The next I knew, I was being pulled to my feet. Thor was supporting me, and Frey was examining me with desperate anxiety. Torches flashed as men poured from the near-by castle.

"What happened?" roared the Hammerer. "Where is the lady Freya?"

"Jotuns!" I gasped. "They got into Asgard, disguised as Aesir. They were after the rune key, and must have seen Odin give it to Freya. They seized her and took her that way." I pointed to the cliffs.

"The stair down the harbor!" Frey cried. "They must have come in a ship!"

As they rushed forward toward the cliff-edge, I staggered after them. My head still ached from the shock of two swords clashing on my helmet. At the edge of the cliff was the narrow stairway, chiseled down the solid rock of the precipice to the fjord below. Two dead Aesir warriors who lay on the stair showed what had become of the guards. Thor started down the steps, but Frey's heart-stopping shout halted him.

"Look! We are too late!"

Out on the ocean, a ship was forging southward through the raging waves, its sail taut in the screaming winds. It was heading straight along the precipitous coast of Midgard. Swiftly it vanished beyond the cliffs.

"The Jotuns and Freya!" moaned Frey. "They have her and the rune key. Now they can loose dark Loki and bring destruction on Asgard!"

Thor shook his great hammer in terrible rage. "Loki's work!" he roared savagely. "It was the arch-traitor who put the thought of that cunning ruse into the heads of the Jotuns, by his telepathic tricks."

"Are we just going to stand here?" I cried wildly. "They've got Freya, as well as the rune key."

It was Freya I was thinking of in that moment, rather than the key. Though the key might loose Loki and bring about the final attack on Asgard which the Aesir feared, that possibility was less dire to me than the threat to Freya. To have her snatched from my arms in this very hour when I had won her love! I felt a red fury that made me long to destroy every Jotun in payment for any harm they might do to the Viking maid I had come to love.

"We can overtake them if we're quick," said Frey. He swung around to the Aesir warriors who had come running from his castle. "Down to the harbor!"

AT TOP speed we ran down the narrow stairway in the cliff. Thor led, with Frey and I close behind the Ham-

merer, and a score or more of warriors following. The moon shone out from behind the flying storm clouds. It lighted our way down the dizzy path that the Aesir had hewn to their harbor. The steps were no more than four feet wide, and there was no protective rail of any kind.

The shouting wind that buffeted us threatened to hurl us off the steps. Below, the black sea thundered, smashing the white foam of bursting waves against the cliffs of Asgard. As we neared the bottom, the steps were so wet with spray that our feet almost slipped from beneath us. Where the stairway ended on the rock ledge that rimmed the harbor, three more Aesir warriors lay dead in their own blood.

"The Jotuns dared do this!" bellowed Thor, his red face dark with rage in the moonlight.

"My own ship!" Frey was shouting above the howling wind to his men. "Cast loose the moorings!"

Dozens of dragon-ships floated in the deep, narrow fjord between the cliffs, moored to iron rings in the ledge. The craft into which Frey leaped was seventy feet long, undecked, and with seats for twenty rowers. Its brazen prow gleamed like a live metal monster. We followed him as the moorings were loosed. The yelling warriors sprang in, taking their accustomed places. Frey grasped the tiller. I stood beside him, while Thor climbed into the bow.

"Push off!" Frey shouted over the roar of the breakers. "Up sail!"

Warriors strained their muscles to fend off with long oars. The dragon-ship shot out of the protection of the fjord into the open sea. Great waves lifted us sickeningly, threatening to hurl us back against the cliffs. But the square, painted sail rose at that moment as Frey's men frantically pulled the ropes. The wind swung our heavy craft away from the looming cliffs.

The brazen prow buried itself in dark water and came up dripping as vast black waves smashed and lifted us.

Cold salt spray dashed our faces. Through the roar and swing of the storm-piled sea, the ship strained southward with increasing speed. The high cliffs of Asgard dropped behind. I glimpsed torches flaring around Valhalla castle as the alarm spread.

We surged past the strait between Asgard Island and the mainland, Midgard. Far overhead, on our left, gleamed the arch of Bifrost Bridge. Then Asgard and Bifrost dropped from sight behind us as our speed quickened. We shot along the mighty cliff coastline of Midgard.

"Can you see them, Thor?" Frey called anxiously to the yellow-haired giant.

His beard glistening with spray as he stood in the plunging and rising bow, Thor was peering ahead.

"Not yet," the Hammerer roared back against the howling wind.

"What will they do with Freya?" I cried.

Frey shook his head. His handsome face was drawn and desperate beneath his gleaming helmet as he shifted the tiller.

"What will they do with us all, Jarl Keith, if they succeed in using the key to loose Loki? That devil will lead the hosts of the Jotuns in the last terrible attack on Asgard."

"It is all my fault," I said bitterly. "If I had not brought the rune key with me, this never would have happened."

THETHE flying clouds had again obscured the moon. Black shadows shrouded the stormy sea. Close on our left rose the sinister cliffs of Midgard, soaring sheer from the water. Frey was keeping our ship hazardously near the precipices, to lose no time in pursuit. So close were we that each mountainous wave threatened to capsize us. The howling winds were bitter cold, freezing the salt spray on our faces. Each time the ship buried its brazen beak in the waves, we shipped water, and Frey's

warriors were bailing furiously.

A high black promontory jutted from the cliffs ahead, and Frey swung the rudder to carry us outside that rocky point. As the ship heeled around in answer, a smashing mass of icy water almost tore us both away from the helm. Then we rounded the point, and the moon broke forth again.

"There they go!" roared Thor's great voice from the bow as the giant Aesir pointed with his hammer.

Far ahead on the wild, moonlit waters, a single ship was flying south along the ominous coast.

"They're heading straight for Jotunheim!" Thor shouted. "We can catch them—"

"Ware ambush!" yelled one of our warriors at that moment.

Simultaneously a shower of arrows rattled down like hail into our craft, instantly killing two of our men. I swung around, appalled. From behind the sharp rock point we had just rounded, a dozen long-ships were darting like ravenous monsters toward us, propelled by bending oars. They were Jotun ships, crowded with huge, black-headed warriors and rowers. Their archers loosed another shower of arrows the instant we discovered them.

"A Jotun ambush!" shouted Frey, swinging the tiller hard. "They knew we'd follow. They waited here for us!"

"Port helm, or they'll grapple us!" bellowed Thor.

It was too late. Next moment, the carved beak of the foremost Jotun ship hit our starboard side with a shock that sent us all staggering. As I scrambled up, I saw steel hooks fly over our gunwale and bite deep into the wood.

"Out swords and cut free!" yelled Frey.

I rushed with Frey, stumbling to the side where yelling Jotun warriors were boarding us. We met them at the head of our own men. Swords and axes clashed in front of my eyes. I glimpsed a hairy, brutal face raging toward me behind an upraised ax. Crouching, I

thrust hard, felt my sword rip between the lacings of a small *brynj*, and bite past into unresisting bone and muscle.

Thor reached our side. Bellowing, he whirled his hammer and crashed it down on Jotun helmets, smashing them and the skulls inside.

Our ship was still being drawn southward by the wind that filled its sail, dragging the Jotun craft that had grappled us. The other Jotun ships were straining oars and sails to grapple with us. The roar of waves under the shuddering ship was drowned by the clash of sword and ax and the terrific clang of Miolnir as the huge hammer crashed down on helmets. Over all rose Thor's terrible battle-cry.

The flat of a Jotun ax struck my shoulder and sent me to my knees. A sword in the hand of a yelling enemy gleamed high above my head. I gaped up, helpless. But Frey stabbed in like a striking serpent. He helped me to my feet as the screaming Jotun toppled overboard.

But a second Jotun craft maneuvered alongside us. Enemy soldiers were hurling grapples over our port side. Frey sprang to cut them loose before the hostile reinforcements could board us.

"The Hammerer! Kill the Hammerer!"

SHOUTING Jotuns leaped upon Thor's towering form like dogs trying to pull down a bear. Miolnir flashed in his hand almost a live thing. But two axes crashed on his helmet and he fell, stunned. I was seeking to cut the grapples of our first attacker. My sword slashed the hide ropes. As the Jotun ship was drawn away from us by the waves, I heard a choking cry of despair.

I swung around. Frey had cut the grapples of the other Jotun enemy. But the wild lurch of our ship as it was freed had thrown him into the black waters. He was helplessly sinking, weighed down by his heavy mail coat.

Instantly I tore off my own mail coat, flung it away, and dived from the back rail into the sea. The icy shock of waters smashed the breath from my body. As my head broke the surface, I saw the battle that had been carried onward hundreds of yards.

The Jotun ships were trying to get their grapples on the Aesir craft again. But the Aesir warriors were dismayed by the stunning of Thor and the loss of Frey. They had swung their ship around and were fleeing back toward Asgard.

I trod water amid the surging waves, looking for Frey. When I glimpsed him going down again, a dozen yards from me, I battled the raving winds and crashing sea until I reached his side. Diving deep, I caught him and pulled him to the surface. It was almost more than I could do to keep him afloat, weighed down as he was by his mail and sword. Now I began to regret taking along my own sword, for it was hampering me. The waves were running mountainously, bearing us in toward the looming cliffs that bulked close.

"Leave me!" Frey choked above the roar of the sea. "Save yourself, Jarl Keith—or we'll both perish!"

"Cling to my shoulder—kick hard with your feet," I panted.

His weight threatened to drag me under at any moment. I fought to swim away from the cliffs, but I was like a child in the relentless grip of those great waves.

Then I glimpsed a little beach that indented the cliffs. I recognized it at once. It was the beach where I had landed my plane!

"This way!" I cried to Frey. "We'll be shattered on the cliffs unless we can get to that beach."

The breakers threatened to drag us north of the little sandy indentation. I put my last ounce of strength into swimming obliquely across the thunderous waves. But those boiling breakers carried us resistlessly toward the looming cliff. We were going to be flung against it—

I yelled to Frey and made a convulsive effort. We barely cleared the cliffs, and were washed up to safety on the beach!

VIII

FOR some minutes we lay on the sand. Though the roaring waves broke over us, neither of us was able to move. Gradually our strength returned, and we dragged ourselves farther up the beach. Frey sat up and panted a question.

"Was Thor slain? I saw him fall as I was hurled into the sea."

"He was only stunned, I think. The men of your ship got it free and fled back toward Asgard."

"I owe you my life, Jarl Keith." Frey's voice throbbed in the darkness. "I was sinking in the waves when you leaped after me. I'll not forget the debt."

I staggered to my feet. "It's more important that we go after those Jotuns and rescue Freya and the key."

"By now," muttered the Aesir noble hopelessly, "they must be near Jotunheim. We couldn't overtake them even if we had a ship."

"I can overtake them in a few minutes," I said grimly. "You Aesir may know a lot about atomic fires and subtle forces, but you don't know airplanes. Mine is moored right on this beach."

"Your flying ship?" he gasped. "I had forgotten about it. Is it swift enough to overtake the Jotun craft?"

"Swift enough?" I repeated. "Wait till you get in it. Maybe it'll make you think a little more highly of my science."

I hastened toward the two great boulders between which I had moored my plane. It was gone! The tracks in the sand showed that it had been dragged down to the water.

"Someone's stolen my ship!" I groaned.

"The Jotuns must have done it. Who ever sent them to kill or capture you, Jarl Keith, sent other warriors later to seize your flying ship."

"They must have dragged it down and pulled it aboard one of their biggest ships," I muttered. "Now we don't have a chance of overtaking Freya's captors before they reach Jotunheim."

"Aye, I fear that all is lost," Frey sighed. "Now that the Jotuns have Freya and the rune key, the Jotun king Utgar will hasten to release Loki from his prison-cave. And once Loki is free and conspiring again with the Jotuns, it will be doom for Asgard and the Aesir."

My natural inclination was to hasten by the fastest method to Jotunheim in an attempt to rescue Freya. But I realized that I owed my first duty to the cause of all the Aesir. It was I who had unwittingly brought the rune key that might loose Loki on them.

Frey, tell me. Where and how far from here is the cave in which Loki is held prisoner?"

"It is miles to the south, deep in the labyrinth of caves that lie under Midgard," he said bewilderedly. "Why do

you ask?"

"If you and I hurried to the door of Loki's prison and waited there," I explained eagerly, "we could be there when the Jotun king came to release Loki. We could strike Utgar down and take back the key before he could release that devil. And then, with the key safe, we could find a way to get Freya out of Jotunheim."

Freya was startled by the boldness of my plan.

"It is a daring scheme," he breathed, "and I do not crave to go near Loki. Yet it might succeed. It might prevent his escape."

"How can we get to that prison-cave before the Jotuns get there with the rune key?"

"There's but one quick way—through the tunnels of the Alfings," Frey declared.

"The Alfings? The dwarfs who live in the caves under the mainland?"

[Turn page]



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"Yes, Jarl Keith, and they like no strangers to come unasked into Alfheim. Yet they are friends of Freya and might let us pass through for her sake. It's dangerous to try, but I am willing."

"Lead on, then," I said. "Find the nearest way into the Alfings' caverns!"

Frey led me to a black opening in the rock wall, the mouth of a pitch-dark passage that ran straight back into the cliff. Its sides showed that it had been excavated by human ingenuity. We entered it.

The tunnel was only five feet high, forcing us to stoop as we proceeded. In a few moments, we were blinded by complete darkness, but we groped on. Then Frey stopped suddenly in the cramped passage. I glimpsed the glimmer of green eyes, shining at us from ahead.

"Wild beasts?" I asked, my hand going to the hilt of my sword.

"Alfings," Frey answered tautly. "They can see us even in this darkness. Take your hand from your sword and do not move, lest you die quickly."

I STOOD unmoving as a statue beside Frey, peering tensely into the darkness ahead, listening to the muffled sound of rapid shuffling. The green eyes shining eerily through the blackness were increased in number. The extreme tension of Frey's figure beside me told me that we were in peril. I remembered what Odin had said of the Alfings. They were an older race than either Jotun or Aesir, and had taken no part in the wars between the two great enemy peoples.

"We are friends, Alfings!" Frey called clearly.

From the dark answered a heavy, hoarse, growling voice.

"You come uninvited into Alfheim. The penalty is death, whether you be Jotuns or Aesir."

"We are Aesir," Frey answered quickly, "and we entered your passages only because of dire necessity. I am Frey, kinsman of the lady Freya whom you know well."

There was a low murmur of deep

voices from ahead, as though his statement had caused excitement.

"Freya's name may save us here," he muttered to me. "She has always been a friend of the Alfings, as her mother and mother's mother were before her."

The bass voice answered from the dark. "The lady Freya is welcome always in Alfheim. But that welcome has not been extended to the other Aesir, as you well know. However, we shall take you to our king Andvar for judgment. Lay down your weapons."

"Drop your sword, Jarl Keith," said Frey.

Our swords fell to the rock floor together. We saw the shining green eyes approach, heard heavy feet thumping all around us and the sudden scratch of flint on steel. A spark leaped. Big resinous torches flamed with ruddy light, illuminating the whole cramped tunnel.

Surrounding us were a dozen Alfings, all armed with short, heavy spears and huge maces of metal. They kept their weapons raised alertly toward us, except the two who held the torches. The tallest was only four and a half feet high. But their bodies were squat and massive beyond belief, with enormously broad, hunched shoulders, arms and legs of tremendous thickness, and big heads with shaggy dark hair. Their faces were massive and swarthy, their green eyes shining like those of animals. They wore leather tunics and leather sandals soled with thin iron.

"Andvar will judge you, Aesir," their leader rumbled to us, his green eyes watching us suspiciously. "If you try to escape, you die!"

"We have no thought of escape," I assured him. "Lead us to Andvar."

The Alfings shuffled forward with us along the cramped tunnel, one of the torch-bearers keeping ahead and one behind. The others watched us closely, keeping their weapons alertly raised. Presently the tunnel ran into another low passage chiseled from the rock and then into another.

"Do these people always live underground?" I asked Frey.

"Not all the time, Jarl Keith. They emerge cautiously by day sometimes. But their dwellings and workshops are in these caves."

"Workshops?" I repeated.

"The Alfings are cunning workers with strange skills," Frey explained. "Not alone are they wonderful forgers of metal. They know how to transmute metals at will by an alchemy that makes use of radioactive force. Freya has often told me of their weird achievements."

AFTER an Alfin had run ahead to bear tidings of our approach, I heard drums throbbing hollowly through the maze of passages. Ever louder they boomed, like the amplified beating of many hearts. We emerged from the tunnel into a great cavern, one of their smithies. Great forges blazed in it, and clever triphammers were beating out white-hot metal.

The quivering glow of the forges paled the torchlight of our guards, and the banging clangor of the brazen hammers was deafening in the echoing cavern. The Alfin smiths looked up from their work to watch with wide, suspicious green eyes. We passed through another resounding cavern of smiths, and entered a chamber that was filled with a glaring white radiance.

"What is that?" I exclaimed, blinking.

"One of the caverns of the alchemists," Frey said. "See, Jarl Keith, how they use a strange science to change metals."

A strange science it was, indeed. The primitive science of the dwarfs was accomplishing things beyond the highly advanced science of my modern world. From leaden brackets projecting from the cavern wall were suspended a dozen globes like brilliant, tiny suns, blazing with white radiance. These were bits of extremely active matter procured from within the Earth by the fearless dwarfs.

Round shields of heavy lead confined the fierce radiation and firmly directed

it downward. That intense torrent of force was filtered through varying plates of translucent, quartz-like stone. Thus tempered, the streaming force played upon leaden trays set underneath. On these trays lay iron or copper objects—ornaments, buckles, dagger-sheaths—and the radiation was transforming them into gold!

"These little fellows aren't so primitive," I muttered enviously. "Transmutation of metals by radiation—it's been a laboratory experiment in my world, but here they actually use it!"

"It is quite simple, Jarl Keith," Frey stated. "They get the radioactive matter from the safer fringes of Muspelheim, the fire-world far beneath this land and from which we originally came."

"But what about those plates of quartz they use as filters?"

"They're not really quartz but a synthetic substance the Alfings can make," he explained. "They can be adjusted to screen out any particular frequency of vibratory force desired. Thus the Alfings are able to apply the isolated radiation which the transmutation needs."

We passed through two more of the alchemic workshops and then re-entered the dark tunnels.

"Frey, will the dwarf king help us?" I asked in a low, anxious voice.

"I don't know," said Frey doubtfully. "He may—if he thinks there's danger of Loki's release. The Alfings fear Loki as greatly as we do."

IX

THE drums ahead stopped throbbing. Frey and I were escorted into the greatest cavern which was bright with the flickering light of many torches. Hundreds of Alfings had hastily gathered here. There were a few of their women, short-statured and hunched like the men, and not many children. Men, women, and children all stared at us in heavy silence.

Upon a stone terrace at the end of the cavern stood a massive Alfin who

wore a heavy gold collar studded with wonderful jewels. Bright, suspicious and fearful eyes looked at us out of his dark, heavy face. It was Andvar, the Alfing king. He listened to our guards' explanation, then spoke to me in a rumbling bass voice.

"Who are you, stranger? You do not look like any Aesir, yet you claim to be a friend of the lady Freya."

"I'm her betrothed," I declared, "and this is her kinsman, Frey."

"The lady Freya alone among Aesir or Jotun is welcome here," Andvar said sullenly. "She alone has always been friendly to us. But you are not welcome. You have trespassed in entering Alfheim."

"Dire necessity forced us to trespass," I said earnestly. "We hurry to reach the deep cavern where Loki lies imprisoned."

My words created a stir of horror among the Alfings.

"Why should you wish to go there?" Andvar demanded. "None of the Aesir has gone to Loki's prison since he was confined there, long centuries ago."

"We must go there," I replied, "because, even now, the Jotuns will be hurrying by other ways to release Loki. They have abducted the lady Freya, and with her they took the rune key that will unlock the door of Loki's prison."

Cries of fear broke from the throng of Alfings in the torchlit cavern. I saw Andvar's massive face grow pale beneath its swarthy skin.

"They hold the lady Freya and the rune key?" he boomed. "But if they release Loki with the key, it means war again between Jotun and Aesir. This time, Loki might well win the final victory!"

"He might," I agreed quickly. "And if Loki succeeded in conquering the Aesir, he will lead the Jotuns to subdue Alfheim."

The terror upon the faces of the Alfings showed clearly that they had already thought of this possibility.

"There is still time to prevent the

freeing of the arch-fiend," I continued. "If we can get to his prison before the Jotuns come there with the key, we can prevent them from setting Loki free. Will you help us?"

Andvar shook his great head troubledly. "We cannot help you attack the Jotuns. Long ago, we told both Aesir and Jotun that we would have no part in their war but would live at peace and trade with both of them. We cannot break our promise by raising our weapons against the Jotuns."

"But unless the Jotuns are prevented from freeing Loki, it means war, in which you Alfings may be crushed as between millstones! If you strike now to help us, you may save your race. Moreover, you will be helping to save Freya, your friend."

DOUBT and fear were written on the faces of all the swarthy, stunted Alfings in the torchlight. But as Frey and I waited tensely, Andvar shook his head again. "We dare not help you. If the Jotuns ever learned that we had raised our weapons against them, then would they seek to destroy us all. They would ruin our gardens and slay our hunters on the surface, and we would not dare emerge any more. Thus would we perish, since we could not live always in darkness."

"It's no use, Jarl Keith," Frey muttered defeatedly. "They're too afraid of the Jotuns to help us in an ambush."

"But they could give us back our swords and lead us by the swiftest way to the door of Loki's prison," I said quickly. "We alone might be able to prevent Loki's release."

Frey nodded eagerly, his eyes burning with sudden impatience to match wits and strength with the enemy.

"Andvar, you can help us without raising your weapons against the Jotuns," I said. "Give us back our swords and lead us by the shortest route to the door of Loki's prison. We ourselves will undertake to prevent the release of the evil one."

"If the Jotuns learned that we did even that, they would be enraged against us," Andvar mused. "But they cannot learn of it unless you tell them. Swear that no matter what befalls you, you will not tell of our part in this. Then we will guide you to Loki's cave."

Frey raised his hand. "I swear it by the Norns, the fates who rule all, and by Wyrd, their mother."

Though I repeated the oath, Andvar seemed only partly satisfied.

"It is a great risk we run. But Loki must not again go free to ravage Midgard with war, death and destruction. We will give you back your swords and guide you, Aesir. It rests upon you two alone to prevent the loosing of Loki."

The red torches bobbed as the Alfings turned fearfully to us.

"We are almost to the cavern-prison of Loki," said Andvar. "I fear to go farther."

The Alfing king's massive face was pale, the dread plain in his green eyes. Our three other dwarf guides were equally terrified.

"You promised to lead us to the door of the prison," I said. "Take us to where we can see it. Then you can return."

Andvar shuddered and hesitantly advanced with his three subjects, though now their steps were slow and reluctant. We were passing through a high, vaulted cavity deep in the rock beneath Midgard. Andvar and the other Alfings had been leading Frey and myself into the maze of natural cavities. Traveling always westward and southward, I judged we were beneath the center of the rocky mainland.

Hours before, we had left the tunnels and work-caverns of Alfheim. These gloomy spaces we now traversed showed no sign of their presence. The stunted men so feared the very name of Loki that they never went near this labyrinth of caves. It was too close to where Loki's body lay in suspended animation.

MY BRAIN was feverish with excitement, hope and despair, as Frey

and I followed our Alfing guides. I realized miserably that even if we were able to prevent the Jotuns from setting their dread lord free, that would still leave Freya a prisoner in dark and distant Jotunheim. A prisoner—or perhaps by now a tortured corpse. . . .

At that thought I clutched the hilt of my sword with wild passion. The Alfings had given us back our weapons. Upon these two blades we must depend to vanquish the Jotuns who would come with the rune key to release and awaken Loki. It was a desperate course we had charted. But if Frey were right, upon our swords rested the only hope of thwarting the release of the imprisoned arch-devil.

Andvar led us into a narrow split in the rock. We squeezed through it in single file, bruising our limbs. From this crevice we emerged into a silent, tomblike gallery, piled with rocks in fantastic shapes.

"We go no farther!" quavered Andvar. Tremblingly he pointed toward the far end of the great gallery. "There lies the door of Loki's prison!"

I peered between the masses of fallen rock that filled the gallery. Far away, something like a web of shimmering radiance closed a gap in the rock wall.

"Aye, it is the door of the arch-traitor's prison," Frey whispered. "Well do I remember when Odin placed it there, long centuries ago."

"The Jotuns haven't come yet with the key!" I breathed eagerly. "We're in time!"

"Now we leave you, for we will not go nearer Loki," Andvar muttered fearfully. He handed us one of the torches. "If you succeed in preventing Loki's release, you will rescue our friend, the lady Freya?"

The dwarf king's anxiety softened me.

"Be sure we will, Andvar," I promised. "Somehow we'll get her out of Jotunheim."

"She has always been kind to us, as her mother and her mother's mother

were before her," declared Andvar. "You are lucky to have won her love, stranger."

"I know," I said humbly.

"Hasten, Andvar!" called the other Alfings softly. "The Jotuns may come at any moment."

Andvar heeded their anxious warning and hurried through the crevice by which we had just come. The thump of their heavy tread died away.

"Can the Jotuns get to Loki's prison without going through Alfheim as we did?" I asked Frey.

"Yes. There are many ways from the surface into these caves, Jarl Keith. The Jotuns will come by one of them."

Holding the torch high, I advanced with Frey through the lofty cavern. A profound silence made the guttering of the torch, even my own breathing, seem loud to my ears.

My heart was pounding as we approached the shimmering door at the end of the cavern. Now I saw that the door was not of matter at all—but of force. Apparently their web of light was less vulnerable than any material door could be. It was projected from apertures on either side of the opening. I guessed that hidden inside the rock must be the mechanisms that projected the force. Frey confirmed my guess.

"Odin himself devised the projectors and sunk them in the rock. They are operated by inexhaustible atomic power, and generate an absolute barrier to all three-dimensional matter. They are controlled by the tiny projector in the rune key. That is why, if the key were destroyed, the door would vanish in one terrific flash of force."

With a queer, shrinking dread, I approached the transparent web. I was about to touch it, when Frey hastily drew me back.

"Keep a safe distance," he warned. "The extra-dimensional force web would blast your hand."

Shaken, I stood a few feet from the shimmering curtain, peering into the small cave beyond.

"Loki!" I whispered hoarsely.

HE LAY upon a skin rug, dimly visible in the light of the radiant door. His arms were outspread, his face upturned. Bright gold was Loki's hair and mustache. Slender and gracefully formed was his unmoving body. He wore helmet, *brynya* and sword like those of the Aesir.

Loki's face was—beautiful! Mere handsomeness could never have struck such awe into me. His eyes were closed, the long, golden lashes slumbering on his white cheeks.

"Most beautiful of all the Aesir was Loki outwardly—a fair shell that hid his black, evilly ambitious soul," Frey said fiercely. "See, Jarl Keith. Beside him lie his monstrous pets, imprisoned like himself in suspended animation."

I tore my eyes from the angelic face of Loki. When I looked beyond him, I felt the hair of my neck bristle. Upon the rough rock floor of that little cavern crouched a huge gray wolf. Large as a bear, it held its mighty head between its paws, its lips baring the awful fangs in an eternal snarl. In a complete circle around both Loki and the frightful wolf lay the black, motionless coils of an enormous serpent.

"The wolf Fenris and Iormungandr, the Midgard snake!" hissed Frey, his eyes glittering hate. "The pets that Loki cherished and that were imprisoned here with him by Odin's science."

"Whoever heard of a wolf and serpent as big as that?" I gasped.

"Loki made them grow that large by some scientific means," muttered Frey. "Another of his evil experiments!"

"He must have used some form of glandular control," I said thoughtfully. "Loki certainly must have had plenty of scientific knowledge."

For a few moments we stared at the three fiends in silence.

"Frey, are they really only in suspended animation?" I whispered. "They seem to be dead."

"They are alive," Frey assured me.

"Only the functions of Loki's physical body are suspended. His mind is conscious, even at this moment. Just as a man can be paralyzed and still be fully conscious, so it is with Loki."

"But even if he's conscious, how could he have influenced me from afar to keep the rune key? How could he have raised the storm that blew me here and given orders to the Jotuns to be waiting for me?"

"In his researches, Loki had developed the power to send telepathic messages," Frey explained tautly. "Do your scientists have that power?"

"They're just beginning to find out about it. They call it extra-sensory perception."

"Loki had developed that power to great lengths," Frey said. "Though his body is imprisoned here, his conscious mind can send forth powerful thought messages. Such commands he sent into your mind, Jarl Keith, from here. And such messages he must have sent to the Jotuns, ordering them to operate his strange mechanisms. They can raise tempests such as blew you here."

"And he's been held here for centuries with his mind awake and conscious!" I muttered in horror, shuddering. "What is that vapor drifting about the chamber?"

"That contains the secret of suspended animation," Frey told me. "Odin devised the vapor which freezes and halts the chemical activity of the body's cells and at the same time preserves each cell unharmed. The vapor alone holds Loki and his pets frozen. If the radiant door were opened and the vapor escaped, the arch-traitor and his pets would awake—"

"Listen!" I hissed suddenly, clutching Frey's arm.

I had heard a dim murmur of voices, footsteps approaching from the farther end of the gallery.

"The Jotuns are coming!", breathed Frey,

"Coming to free Loki," I said. "We've got to hide and take them by surprise."

X

IDASHED out the torch and flung it away. We were plunged into darkness that was relieved only by the pearly radiance from the door of Loki's prison. I pulled Frey behind the shelter of one of the fantastic piles of rocks that littered the cavern. We drew our swords and crouched there, waiting.

The voices and footsteps grew louder. Red torchlight began to gleam vaguely into the dark gallery from the crevice at its far end. Then, as the torch-bearers stepped into the cavern, it blazed with flickering crimson light. There were ten people in the Jotun party. Besides eight big, black-bearded Jotun warriors, three of whom bore torches, there were two leaders.

One was a giant Jotun with a wolf-like, savage face and glittering black eyes. His great helmet and armor were studded with gems, his fierce face blazing with excitement. The other was a dark-haired Jotun girl whose sinuous form was clothed in a long, deep-blue gown. Her dark beauty was striking, but there was something unholy in the avid eagerness of her lustrous black eyes.

"Utgar, the Jotun king," whispered Frey. "And Hel, princess of Jotunheim, past accomplice of Loki in his plots against the Aesir and his pupil in dark scientific knowledge."

"Utgar has the rune key," I muttered, gripping my sword hilt.

I had seen the little gold cylinder shining in the hand of the Jotun king. From Utgar came a bellow of brute triumph, bestial exultation, as his eyes found the shimmering door at the end of the gallery.

"It is the place!" he shouted. "There's the door of our lord's prison."

Hel, the dark Jotun princess, uttered a low laugh.

"Said I not that I could bring you to the place by ways which would avoid the Alfings?" she asked in a throaty, sinisterly rich voice. "For I myself was

guided by the thought message of our lord Loki, who instructed us how to get the key from Asgard—”

Her supple figure stiffened, and her narrowed eyes roved around the torch lit cavern.

“I hear our lord's mind speaking to me now,” she murmured. “He warns that there is danger lurking in this place. Enemies have been here and are here still!”

“Frey, we must strike now,” I whispered urgently. “Fell the torch-bearers while I strike down Utgar and grab the key. In the darkness, we may be able to escape.”

But as we tensed to spring out on the Jotuns, the princess Hel uttered a sharp cry.

“Our enemies are there!” She pointed straight at the rocks behind which we crouched. “Our lord warns—”

Instantly Frey and I leaped out with our swords flashing in the torchlight. But the split-second warning of Hel had destroyed our advantage of surprise. Just as swiftly, Utgar and his warriors had ripped out their swords. They met us with raised blades as we charged them.

I leaped toward Utgar, and my sword slashed desperately. But with a roar of rage, the Jotun king parried my stroke with his own great blade. Numbing shock deadened my arm as my steel clashed against his. Sparks leaped from the blades. Seeking to beat down his guard with terrific strokes and seize the rune key from his hand, I glimpsed Frey in silent action. He was striking down first one of the three Jotun torch-bearers, then another.

The princess Hel had darted out of the path of combat and stood with a tiny dagger in her hand. Her eyes were blazing with excitement. Skilled as Frey was, and regardless of my furious resolve to rescue Freya, we were beset by greater numbers. They began driving us back.

“It is Frey and the outlander!” Utgar bellowed as he fought off my attack.

“Separate them and cut them down!”

“Kill them!” Hel commanded throatily. “They seek to prevent the freeing of Loki.”

WITH a strength that was born of desperation, I beat down Utgar's sword. My blade whirled up, and I yelled hoarsely as I set myself to cleave the neck of the Jotun king.

“Jarl Keith, look out behind!” shouted Frey, though he was hard pressed by three antagonists.

I heard a sword swish down behind me. I started to spin around, but the blade descended on my helmet with stunning force. My brain rocked, and bursting light blinded me.

I felt myself falling, my sword dropping from my nerveless hand, my vision beginning to darken. I glimpsed two Jotuns leaping upon Frey's back as he fought. Striking him with daggers, they dragged him down at last, covered with blood.

“Now give me the rune key, Utgar!” I heard Hel cry. “I'll release our lord before other Aesir come to stop us.”

“Aye, set Lord Loki free at once!” Utgar bellowed, his brutal, dark face triumphant as he handed her the golden cylinder.

Dimly, while I fought to retain consciousness, I saw Hel glide forward to the shimmering door of Loki's prison, the rune key in her hand. I saw her point the golden cylinder toward the shimmering web. When she pressed the graven runes upon it in a complex combination, the door began to fade!

“Our lord's mind instructed me well how to operate this key that Odin's science devised!” gloated Hel.

The web of force was gone. The projectors which had maintained it had now been turned off by the operation of the rune key. Out of the cave within rushed a cloud of pale-green vapor. Hel recoiled from it. Utgar, too, staggered back, choking and dazed. My consciousness was passing.

Darkly I perceived the prostrate body

of Loki stirring. I saw him stumble to his feet. The huge wolf Fenris was rising, opening blazing, feral eyes, snarling a savage roar that reverberated thunderously. And the coils of the giant serpent were sliding slowly in reawakened life.

Loki stepped out of the chamber in which he and his monstrous companions had been imprisoned so long in suspended animation. As he stood, his tall, slender, graceful form seemed to expand. His beautiful white face and golden hair shone in the torchlight.

Blazing like those of Lucifer newly risen from the pit, his dazzling eyes swept over the awed, trembling Jotuns, the prone forms of Frey and myself, the stupefied and dread-shadowed face of Utgar, the unholy eagerness of Hel's dark, beautiful face. Tangible light and force seemed to flame from Loki's blue eyes.

Beside Loki, the wolf Fenris was snarling horribly at us. Its terrible white fangs were bared, its huge head thrust forward with ears flattened. And on the arch-traitor's other side reared up the great spade-shaped head of the Midgard snake. Cold reptilian eyes glittering, the forked red tongue flickered in and out between its scaly jaws.

Darkness was claiming my mind. As though from dim, enormous distances, I heard the jubilant, golden voice of Loki.

"Free at last! Now comes the hour of my vengeance upon the Aesir!"

That voice was the last thing I heard. Even as its accents of superhuman triumph struck my ears, complete unconsciousness claimed me.

A throbbing, blinding pain in my head was my first sensation of returning consciousness. Then I became aware that I lay upon a hard bed of some kind and that the air was cold and damp. I tried to open my eyes and could not. Summoning my strength by a great mental effort, I raised my hand weakly to my head. Instantly I heard a joyful, sweet voice.

"He awakens, Frey!"

THAT voice, vibrating through the fibers of memory in my dazed brain, compelled me to open my eyes. Freya was bending over me. Her pale, beautiful face was framed by her unbound yellow hair, and it was eager with gladness. Her warm, blue eyes looked fondly down into mine.

She still wore the white linen gown that she had worn at the feast in Valhalla before her abduction. And I saw, too, that Frey, pale and bandaged around his neck and shoulder, had stumbled over to look down at me.

"Freya!" My voice was only a weak whisper.

Tears were in her lovely eyes as she put her face against mine, her cool cheek against my lips.

"Jarl Keith!" she whispered. "I feared you were dying. It has been hours that you have slept like the dead."

Weakly I put my arms around her slim shoulders and held her close to me. The bright gold of her hair on my face seemed at that moment to hold all the sweetness of the world.

Then I looked beyond her. Frey's pale, haunted face and terrible remembrance rushed through my stunned mind. Loki and Fenris wolf and the great serpent emerging from their prison!

"Loki!" I gasped. "I saw him come forth—"

"Yes, Jarl Keith," said Frey. "That which we Aesir have feared has happened. The arch-devil has been released!"

The blood seemed to leave my heart as realization crashed home. The ancient rhyme on the rune key seemed to echo mockingly in my ears.

Bring me not home,
Lest Ragnarok come.

It had happened. I had brought the fateful rune key home. And now Loki and his monsters were free to lead the Jotun hosts in the last and most terrible attack against Asgard. I groaned at the thought of my own guilt, for it was all my responsibility. It was I, inspired by what spells of Loki I could not im-

agine, who had caused the rune key to be found. I had brought it into this hidden land to loose an incredibly evil menace that had lain dormant for centuries—yet conscious—to add new torments and more vicious horrors to the old ones.

Freya had raised her face. She was looking at me with blue eyes that were bright with dread, her red lips quivering.

"But where are we?" I cried, trying to sit up. "How is it you're with us, Freya?"

"We are in Jotunheim, Jarl Keith," she whispered. "I have been held here since the Jotun raiders brought me here and took the rune key away. And you and Frey were brought here and imprisoned with me but a few hours ago. You were unconscious—dying, I feared."

Her slim arm supported me as I sat up. Dazedly I stared around. We occupied a small stone cell, with walls that were of massive, damp blocks. The heavy wooden door was solidly closed. One tiny, barred window admitted pale daylight and barely enough air. Frey and Freya helped me as I rose to my feet from the rude hide couch where I had lain. I stumbled with their support to the window and looked out at ancient Jotunheim.

Jotunheim crouched like a great, slumbering reptile on a low plateau above steaming marshes. A sluggish black river wound from the rugged hills behind the city. Down past the stone walls it oozed through the dank, brooding marshes to the distant sea.

It was a city of squat, massive castles and forts, built with antediluvian rudeness. The giant stone blocks were overgrown with green, hideous moss. Our cell was in the basement level of the most enormous of the castles, a high, oblong structure.

EVEN in daylight, the city was filled by chill, foggy mists from the steaming morasses below. From our window I could see scores of longships moored in

the river, which wound past Jotunheim's northern wall. Hosts of Jotuns were busy on ships and shore. Warriors and *thralls* were carrying stacks of weapons, fitting new oars and masts, all in a bustle of hurried activity. Through the ancient, somber city trotted squads of hastening warriors, hurrying men and women. Everyone was feverishly engaged in mysterious preparations.

"Captives in Jotunheim," I moaned. "And Loki—"

"He is here, too," said Frey unhappily. "In this palace, which belongs to Utgar, he directs the preparations you see. Those are the preparations for the last great attack on Asgard."

Freya, holding my arm, looked up at me with blue eyes that were almost black with dread.

"The Jotuns went mad when Loki arrived with Utgar, Hel, you and Frey," she said. "They cry that now at last they shall wipe the Aesir out of existence."

"Ragnarok, the final struggle, draws near," Frey declared solemnly. "Aye, this is the struggle that we Aesir knew must come if ever Loki were freed."

"But Odin and the Aesir will not yield!" I cried. "They will throw back Loki and the Jotuns!"

"I pray the fates that it be so," Frey said. "But the Jotuns outnumber us now more greatly than before. With Loki and his evil science, Fenris and Iormungandr fighting on their side, we have reason to fear for Asgard. But if perish we must, the Jotuns and Loki shall perish with us. That I know."

"Can't we sneak out of here and get back to Asgard?" I asked urgently.

His haggard face twisted into a hopeless smile.

"How could we even escape this cell? And if we did, the whole city is swarming with armed warriors making ready. Never could we win past all the soldiers of Jotunheim to freedom."

"What will they do with us?" I pressed. "Why do they hold us instead of killing us?"

"I don't know," he muttered, "but you can be sure that Loki has some evil scheme in mind that will make use of us."

He staggered, and I hastened to help him to the hide couch, where he sat down weakly.

Frey's wounds in that battle in the cave had been serious ones. He had lost most of his unaging strength.

My own strength was rapidly returning. I had paced back and forth from door to window of the cell, racking my brain for some means of escape. There was none. Finally I gave it up and sat down dully beside Freya.

Hours must have passed as we sat in a heavy, hopeless silence. The sun was setting through the slowly thickening mists of Jotunheim, casting a pale beam onto the stone floor. There was a rattle at the lock of our door. It opened, and a big, fierce-eyed Jotun captain stood glaring at us. Behind him were a dozen guards.

"You, outlander," said the captain to me. "Come with us. Lord Loki would speak to you."

"What does Loki want with me?" I demanded, rising painfully to my feet.

"Is it for me or for you, outland dog, to question the reasons of our lord?" roared the captain. "Come, or be dragged!"

I pressed Freya's hand and went with the guards. In a gloomy, stone corridor, they bared their swords to cut me down if I attempted escape or resistance. The door of the cell was barred again, and two of the Jotuns took their places outside it. The others marched me away.

The dank chill of the passage struck me to the marrow. But I felt a greater chill of dread at this summons from Loki. I was going to face the arch-traitor who had waked for his final, most victorious revenge. . . .

XI

WE PASSED through gloomy corridors and chambers of age-old stone,

crusted with evil-looking white fungi and lichens, dripping with condensed vapor. Rats squeaked across our path unheeded. Up broad stairs of troglodytic hugeness, we climbed into the upper levels of the massive palace. Everywhere we met soldiers and *thralls* hurrying to and fro, carrying piles of spears and arrows, stacks of shields, and other war supplies.

Tense preparations for the attack on Asgard were unceasingly going on through the whole palace and city.

The Jotun captain led us through another corridor, to the edge of a large, poorly lit hall.

"Wait," he barked, stopping. "Our lord is not finished with Princess Hel."

"What are they doing?" I asked, awed. "What kind of machinery is that?"

"Silence, outlander!" snapped the captain.

I stood among my guards, staring at the amazing scene that was taking place. The hall into which I looked was of great dimensions, its roof supported by a forest of massive stone pillars. The only illumination came from pale shafts of daylight that trembled down from small, high, slit-windows, as though afraid to enter this dark place. White wisps of fog still swirled amid the pillars, like homeless ghosts drifting idly.

On a raised stone platform at one end of the hall, in a massive throne carved of black rock, sat Loki. His bright golden hair glittering in the gloom, and the flashing mail he wore made him seem a figure of living light. Beside his throne, mighty head between its paws, lay the monster wolf Fenris. The Midgard snake I did not see.

Loki's beautiful face was intent, his graceful form leaning forward. Beside his throne stood the big, black-haired Jotun king, Utgar, and the darkly beautiful Hel, princess of Jotunheim. They were staring into an unfamiliar-looking mechanism whose complexities of glowing wires and glass rods were partly

hidden by a metal cover. On the cover, though, was a square quartz screen that reproduced a living scene.

"See, Lord Loki, the picture clears!" cried Hel.

"I see, too," Utgar roared. "It is Asgard!"

"Aye, it is Asgard," said Loki in his wonderfully sweet voice, his eyes brooding as he peered into the screen. "Behold, the nobles of the Aesir are gathered in Valhalla for council. We shall hear them."

Loki touched another control. From the great hall's edge, I could barely detect a low buzz of speech from the mechanism.

"I cannot hear clearly," Utgar complained. "What are they saying?"

"The king Odin is speaking," said Hel with a contemptuous smile on her beautiful face. "He tells the Aesir nobles that he fears Loki is loosed, with Fenris and Iormungandr, and that Frey and Freya and the outland Jarl are captives in Jotunheim. The Aesir look wildly at one another at that news. There is a shout from Thor."

"That stupid, brainless bear!" said Loki scornfully. "A lout who knows nothing but wrestling, eating and cracking skulls."

"What says the Hammerer?" Utgar asked.

Hel laughed. "Lord Thor is angry. His head is bound from a wound, as you can see. He roars that the Aesir vanquished Loki and the Jotuns once before and that they will do so again. And this time, he says, they will slay Loki instead of imprisoning him."

Loki leaped to his feet. A flash of rage as blinding and terrible as lightning twisted his face.

"Slay me?" he hissed. "Sons of the Aesir, my ancient people, you will rue that thought when Asgard goes down in flame and death."

"The king Odin is speaking again," Hel told Utgar. "He says they must prepare for the coming struggle. They must devise, if possible, some way to

rescue Frey and Freya and the Jarl Keith from Jotunheim. And Odin says he fears Loki may be using his scientific powers to spy on them. He will make sure, he says—"

HASTILY Loki reached out and touched a screw on that strange mechanism. The picture in its quartz screen and the buzz of voices ceased. I knew it must be some super-development of television, able to operate without a transmitter.

"We have seen and heard enough," Loki said moodily. "The Aesir know we will attack them, but they'll have small time to prepare. Two days hence, we march on Asgard to crush them."

"Aye, but be careful, Lord Loki," warned Utgar anxiously. "Odin, too, has great powers of ancient science. Once before, he snatched victory from us because of your too great confidence."

"Croak not your warnings to me!" Loki stormed. "I have had centuries in which to think. Nothing can save the Aesir this time. Get you both gone now, till I call you."

At the tone of his master's voice, Fenris raised his enormous head and snarled horribly. Utgar hastily retreated from Loki's blazing wrath, backing toward a door. Less urgently the Princess Hel followed him. Without looking in the direction where I stood with my guards, watching this scene in fascinated horror, Loki spoke.

"Bring the outlander before me."

As the Jotuns marched me forward I saw that they were all trembling. They halted me in front of the black throne. I looked up defiantly into the brooding blue eyes of Loki. He spoke finally to the captain of the Jotun guards.

"Take your men and wait outside the hall."

"But, lord, we can't leave you here alone with this outland dog!" protested the captain.

Loki turned a withering glance upon him.

"Think you I need such as you to protect me?" he asked bitingly. "Get you gone!"

The captain and his men almost tumbled over themselves in their haste to leave the hall. I stood there alone, facing Loki, the wolf and the snake that had slid to the throne, in that vast and gloomy hall of drifting fog and chill. Uncontrollably my heart pounded in sudden excitement and hope.

For my eyes had fastened on the sword that hung at Loki's side. If I could end the arch-traitor's life with that thirsty blade, I would die gladly, knowing that I had atoned for bringing the rune key into peaceful Asgard.

I sprang forward with wild determination. But instantly, like a thunderbolt of hurtling flesh, the huge wolf Fenris leaped upon me. The monster's weight knocked me to the floor. His huge, hairy body crushing me, his hot breath scorching me and terrible fangs gleaming, I saw Fenris's mighty jaws yawning above me.

The glaring, feral green eyes of the gigantic wolf blazed down into mine with almost human hatred. Those jaws gaped to crush my skull like an eggshell.

"Fenris, loose him!" snapped Loki's voice, coming as though from a great distance.

Fenris turned his massive head a little, and a protesting, savage snarl rumbled from him. He was resisting his master's order. He wished to kill me.

"Do you grow disobedient?" flared Loki's voice.

I heard his quick step coming from the throne toward me. Still pinned down by Fenris's huge weight, I saw Loki reach down and smack the wolf stingily on its great muzzle. . . .

FENRIS whimpered apologetically to his master. The wolf backed off hastily. As Loki went back and seated himself again on the black throne, the huge animal again crouched down beside it. But his feral, blazing eyes never left my face. Shaking, I stumbled to my

feet. I saw amusement in the brilliant blue eyes and angelic face of Loki as he sat regarding me.

"Do you still wish to kill me, outlander?" he asked with a shockingly sweet laugh. "I might not be able to hold Fenris from your throat next time."

Hearing his name, the monstrous wolf growled deep in his throat, snarling and baring his great fangs as he watched me. Hot resentment at the mocking devil who was regarding me with such amusement made me stiffen and clench my fists.

"If you are going to have me killed, why not get it over with?" I demanded.

"I am not sure that I shall take your life, outlander," said Loki, searching my face. "After all, I owe you much. It was you who brought back into this land the rune key that finally gave me and my pets our freedom."

"I wish I had died before your hideous mental commands seduced my brain!"

"Now why should you wish that?" Loki asked with deep interest. "Why should you hate me so?"

"Because I know that you are evil and that your plans are vicious," I stated harshly. "For twenty centuries in the outside world, the name of Loki has been synonymous with treachery, even though no one in that outer world dreams that a real Loki ever existed."

Loki nodded his golden head thoughtfully.

"That is true. Yet what evil have I done to you, Jarl Keith? Have I not brought you into a land that no other of your race has ever seen? Have I not given you new and undreamed-of adventure? What more could I do for you? You see, I know that in your soul you are an adventurer, a seeker of the new and the strange."

"It's what you plan to do to the Aesir that makes me hate you," I retorted. "I admire them—and you plot to use the Jotuns to destroy them."

Loki's beautiful face darkened, like the sun when a storm cloud veils it. His

wondrous eyes throbbed with an age-old hate.

"I love the Aesir, too, Jarl Keith," he said broodingly. "Yes, long ago when we dwelt in deep Muspelheim and I was second only to Odin himself, I did much for my race. I delved into scientific secrets that had been hidden from them and I found new truths. I would have done much more for them, had they made me their ruler in Odin's place. For I was never satisfied, as Odin was, with a static, stagnant well-being."

"I burned with the desire to acquire all knowledge that man could acquire, to know the reason for every phenomenon in the world and in the sky. I longed to acquire every power that man could ever acquire, so that we should be unchallenged masters of all nature. It was I who freed the Aesir from sickness and age. I made them almost immortal, by kindling the atomic fires whose radiation prevents disease and age. Was that not a great gift I made to my people?"

As a scientist I could not help feeling a certain sympathy with Loki. Yet I realized that he was presenting merely his own side of the case.

"Yes," I admitted. "But in making the Aesir that gift of near-immortality, you almost destroyed them. You brought catastrophe on the subterranean world of Muspelheim and forced them to flee up here. No wonder Odin forbade you to carry on such dangerous researches!"

Loki shrugged. "There can be no great victory without great danger, outlander. I had a vision of leading the Aesir to undreamed-of heights of power and wisdom, though by a road beset with vast perils. I was willing to risk those perils, to be great or to die. But dull Odin blocked my path. He said, 'It is not good to endanger all the world to gain power and learning for ourselves.'

"The Aesir agreed with him, and turned from me and my vaulting dreams. I would have made them like eagles soaring into the sky. But they preferred to follow Odin and live out their lives in dull, accustomed routine."

OKI'S eyes blazed, and his graceful form stiffened on the black throne as he spoke. I could not help feeling sympathy with him. No real scientist could willingly submit to suppression of his desire to know, his yearning to master the laws of nature. Loki's blue eyes fastened on me, and he smiled thoughtfully, his passion fading.

"I read your mind, Jarl Keith," he said quickly, "and I see that you think the same as I."

"Not your lust for power," I snapped.

"Do not deny it," he said. "You are of my own breed, Jarl Keith. We are more alike than any others in this land. For just as I risked my own fate and that of my people to win new knowledge and power, so you, who are also a scientist and searcher after truth, came northward into danger and hardship to search for new, strange truth. Yes, we two are of the same mind."

Though his voice rang with sincerity, I fought mentally against his seductive thoughts.

"It is because we are so much alike," he continued, "that I was able to fling the web of my suggestion into your brain. Though you were far away on your ship beyond the ice, yet I could direct you to recover the sunken rune key."

"How could you do that, Loki?" I asked with intense interest. "How could your will range far when your body was held in suspended animation in that prison-cave?"

"You outlanders have concentrated more on mechanical devices than on the subtler forces of science. Otherwise, you would understand better the nature of the mind. The brain is really an electro-chemical generator, and thought is the electric current it generates. A brain which has developed the power can fling its web of electric thought-impulses abroad and into another brain. It can see with the senses of that other brain and even somewhat direct its physical body."

"Thus, during the centuries that I lay

prisoned and helpless, I sent the web of my thoughts far afield, seeking a means of escape. At long last, I located the rune key where the Aesir had thrown it in the outer ocean. I could not send any of the Jotuns to secure it, for they could not cross the vast ice without perishing. But at last your ship came north and was near the sunken rune key.

"I seized the opportunity to influence you to have the rune key dredged up. And once you had it, and were in the air in your flying ship, I sent a mental message to the princess Hel, my pupil. I commanded her to operate the storm-cones in my laboratory, which would cause a tempest to blow you hither."

"Storm-cones?" I repeated. "What device could be used to cause such a tempest?"

Loki smiled and rose to his feet. "Come, Jarl Keith, I'll show you. I think you, a scientist like myself, will be interested in my laboratory."

XII

HE LED the way across the vast, many-pillared hall. The giant wolf, Fenris, rose and followed us on padding feet, his feral green eyes never leaving me. Loki brought me into a smaller stone chamber. It was indeed a laboratory—the strangest I had ever seen.

Two small, blazing suns of radioactive matter, suspended in lead bowls, illuminated the dusky room. The intense white radiance glittered off an array of unfamiliar mechanisms and instruments.

I saw another of the complex instruments of remote vision, with a square quartz view-screen, such as Loki, Utgar and Hel had been using in the great hall. And I noticed devices which appeared to be similar to the transmutation apparatus used by the Alfings. But these were greatly refined in design. Using concentrated beams of radioactive energy shot from leaden funnels, they could effect even more rapid transmuta-

tion of small metal objects.

Loki led the way to the most striking feature of this array of alien scientific instruments. Proudly he gestured at a row of big objects which looked like heavy nozzles of fused quartz mounted on swivels above square, copper-shielded mechanisms. The interior complexities I could not see. Loki laid his hand on one of the nozzles of quartz.

"These are the storm-cones I long ago devised, Jarl Keith. They can cause the most terrific tempest at a distance of even hundreds of miles."

"How can they do that?" I asked incredulously.

"It is quite simple." He smiled. "A lightning storm is caused by a sudden sharp difference in electric potential between cloud and Earth, or cloud and cloud. These storm-cones spray a carefully aimed and canalized electric field that causes such an abnormal difference of potential in any desired location. When I lead the Jotun horde to attack Asgard, I'll first bring destructive lightning down upon the Aesir forces. Then they'll fall easy prey to my savage warriors."

I was too appalled by that threat to comment. Loki led me toward a door on the opposite side of the laboratory.

"Now perhaps you can instruct me a little, Jarl Keith," he said. "Come with me."

The door opened into a big, stone-paved court outside the ancient citadel. It was walled, but a great gate in one wall was open, leading out onto the slope that ran steeply toward the river. Dusk had fallen, and the white mists that shrouded Jotunheim were thicker.

My eyes flew to a familiar object in this court. It was my rocket ship. It had not been destroyed, after all.

"Yes, it is your flying ship," Loki said. "After you landed in Midgard, I knew it was a matter of days until I was released. I sent a thought order to the Princess Hel to have Jotun longships bring the craft here, for I wish much to examine this product of the outland

world's science. But don't cherish any hopes of making a sudden escape in it, Jarl Keith. I've only to say a word to send Fenris ravening at your throat."

The monster wolf behind us snarled again as he heard his name. I shrugged.

"I wouldn't leave without Freya and Frey, anyway."

Loki inspected the whole interior of the plane, asking me quick, intelligent questions about every feature of it. He seemed to grasp the design of the ship and its highly improved rocket motor almost instantly.

"You are clever, you outlanders, to devise such things," he said with sincere respect.

"Don't you want to look at the controls?" I asked.

MY HEART was thudding, for I had seen a wild, insane opportunity. Loki entered the cabin, and I explained the controls. Then I opened the sack of white chemicals which we always carried on these Arctic flights. I took out a handful and showed them to him.

"These are chemicals that generate heat. We use them to free the plane's wheels if they become frozen into the ice."

"That, too, is clever," he mused as he emerged from the plane. "You outlanders are indeed mechanically ingenious, though you have not probed the ancient science of the deepest forces of nature as we Aesir did."

He said nothing more as he brought me back through the laboratory to the dusky great hall. Fenris stalked at our heels. Then Loki turned.

"I could teach you our ancient science, Jarl Keith," he said to my surprise. "You could learn much that your science puzzles over. And you would be second only to me, once the Aesir are conquered."

I began to understand what he was suggesting.

"You want me to turn against the Aesir—against my friends?"

"That girl Freya—and even Frey, if

you wish—can be spared."

"Why do you wish me to become your follower?" I asked suspiciously.

Loki's beautiful face was undeniably sincere as he answered me.

"Because it is as I said. We two are more akin than any others in this land. We seek scientific truth and love the new and strange. Besides, I have no human friend, for Utgar is a brute-brained tool, and Hel is but a wicked wildcat who never can learn my science. It is true that I have Fenris and Iormungandr. My wolf and serpent have wisdom and cunning which are almost human, but they are not human friends. Speak, Jarl Keith. Will you join me as friend and follower?"

Stunned by the offer, I tried desperately to think. If I could make Loki believe I was willing to join him, and then work against him. . . .

"Your words are convincing," I answered, as though deeply thoughtful. "We are alike. I think that I shall join you, Loki."

Loki smiled at me, a weary, half-scornful, half-amused smile.

"Jarl Keith, I thought better of you than to expect you to try such transparent stratagems as this upon me," he said. "Can you not understand that in experience you are to me but as a small child? Can you hope to dupe me when I can read your mind?"

I looked up at him defiantly.

"I would fight the devil with fire. You know the truth now, Loki. I have only hate for you, as for all traitors. You prepare to lead these savage Jotuns against your own people because your own kind has cast you out."

I know that got under his skin, for his eyes narrowed. His mouth tightened, and for a split second I glimpsed that angelically beautiful face warp into a hell mask of white fury. It was as though the raging evil inside him looked forth naked and unhidden. The wolf Fenris, as though understanding his master's mood, sprang to his feet and snarled viciously at me. Then Loki's

face cleared, and he laughed at me without a trace of ill-feeling.

"You have courage, Jarl Keith, proving even more that you are like myself. Yes, you are afraid to admit to yourself how much we two are alike and how much you like me."

That shot got home to me, for I sensed that it was the truth. I did feel a sympathy for this fallen Lucifer that was hard for me to thrust down.

"You shall stay imprisoned here in Jotunheim until after our forces have conquered Asgard," Loki decided. "Once the Aesir are destroyed and the past cannot be recalled, I think you will be wise to join me as friend and follower." He raised his voice in a peremptory order. "Guards, return this prisoner to his cell!"

The Jotun captain and his men came running from outside. Not daring even to look up at their overlord, they hustled me out of the hall. . . .

AS I went with them, I looked back. Loki seemed already to have forgotten me. He sat in that dismal, mist-filled hall, brooding with chin in hand, his bright-gold head bent. The wolf Fenris looked up at him with faithful, brilliant green eyes.

I was conducted back through the same dank corridors and passages to the subterranean level of the palace. The tall guards clanked toward the door of our cell and opened it. Without ceremony I was thrust in. When the door was locked after me, the guards marched away.

Freya came anxiously across the dark little cell and found her way into my arms.

"I feared that you would not return, Jarl Keith," she moaned softly.

"What did Loki want with you?" Frey asked, his pale face intent.

I told them most of what had taken place. Freya listened with horror-widened eyes, her kinsman in thoughtful silence.

"So Loki wishes you to join him," he

muttered when I had finished. "That is strange."

"I think it's only because he's lonely," I said. "He has nothing but contempt for these Jotuns, whom he sees only as a means to an end—and that end is to crush the Aesir. Actually I felt a little sorry for him."

Freya stared at me surprisedly. Frey's pale, handsome face tightened as he warned me:

"Heed not the arch-traitor's subtle persuasions, Jarl Keith! Never lived anyone who could harm man or beast by his silver tongue and handsome face as can Loki."

"Never fear," I reassured him. "My loyalty is with the Aesir. No tempting could ever change that."

I went on to tell them of what Loki had told me in his laboratory, explaining his intention to use his storm-cones against the Aesir.

"We must get back to Asgard and warn Odin, so he can prepare a defense," I concluded. "My flying ship is in the court on the citadel's river side—"

"How can we reach your craft when we can't even get out of this locked cell?" Frey replied hopelessly.

"I think we can escape this cell, at least," I said. I drew from my pocket a handful of white chemical powder and showed it to them. "It's the chemical I always carried in my plane to melt ice from the wheels when necessary. I showed Loki this handful and then put it in my pocket."

"What good will that do, Jarl Keith?" Freya asked puzzledly.

"The lock on the door of this cell is a crude one, made of soft copper," I answered. "I believe this substance can burn away enough of the lock to free us. I'm going to try it anyhow."

I stuffed the chemical powder into the large crevices of the clumsy lock. Then I took our jar of water and poured a little over the powder. The hissing and sizzling of the chemical reaction continued for several minutes. When it

ceased, I tugged gently at the lock. It still held. I pulled harder, and with a rasp, it gave way.

"Follow me," I whispered tensely. "I think I know the direction to the court where the plane is. If we can only get through the corridors without meeting anyone!"

We emerged into the dusty stone passage. I led the way toward the right, taking the first cross-corridor that led northward. The cold chill of the night fog penetrated the marrow of our bones, and our nerves were harp-string taut as we pressed on through the dark corridors.

Suddenly I shrank back into the shadows. I had seen two Jotun warriors approaching from a cross-corridor ahead.

"Hurry!" one was urging the other fearfully. "Do you wish to meet the hideous one that now lurks in these passages?"

"Frey, we'll have to jump them," I whispered. "Be ready."

The two Jotuns came around the corner into our dusky corridor. Frey and I leaped on them, taking them utterly by surprise. What followed was not pretty. We had grabbed their throats, for it was essential that they should not give an alarm. There was a fierce, deadly scuffle in the misty, dark tunnel, until we throttled them.

The Jotuns lay limp when Frey and I straightened, panting. We took the swords the two warriors had not had a chance to draw.

"Come on," I panted. "This way. Those warriors must have entered from one of the outside courts."

We hurried down the shadowy passage from which the Jotuns had come. Then Freya suddenly stopped, pulling me to a halt.

"Listen, Jarl Keith," she urged in a hushed voice. "Something sinister is coming."

In the silence, I heard a strange silky, rustling sound in the dark and misty passage ahead. It was growing nearer, louder—

A giant, spade-shaped head reared out of the curling mists ahead of us! Two opaline, unwinking eyes that held the dull glitter of an alien intelligence contemplated us from above a gaping mouth in which a forked red tongue flickered.

"This is what the Jotuns feared!" Frey cried wildly.

"The fates save us!" Freya prayed. "It is Iormungandr!"

I also recognized that giant, scaly body of long, rippling blackness, that huge head and those alien, glittering eyes. It was Iormungandr who towered before us in the misty dusk of the chill tunnel. The ageless and undying, the great Midgard serpent itself, was glaring down with blood-lusting eyes!

XIII

WE STOOD petrified by horror in that foggy, stone-walled corridor, gazing cataleptically at the hideous creature whose reptilian head was rearing up from the curling white mists. Freya's slim figure had shrunk against me. I heard her utter a choking cry. Frey stood in front of us, his sword raised, his face wild as he looked up at the looming head.

The hideous, abnormally huge coils could only be glimpsed in the mists beyond. But the giant spade-shaped head that hung above us was clear in our appalled vision. The enormous, opaline eyes were coldly brilliant as they stared down at us.

In that moment of stupefying horror, I recognized the intelligence in those unwinking reptilian eyes. This serpent of a bygone age had lived on for centuries in this land of eternal youth, with its master Loki and wolf Fenris. It had acquired an intelligence comparable with the human. A strange mind shone from those coldly malignant eyes.

"The Midgard snake!" Frey whispered.

"Jarl Keith!" Freya screamed to me. The great head of the snake Iormun-

gandr abruptly darted toward us. Frey struck out madly with his sword. I saw the blade slash into the scaly neck. But it caused only a shallow wound from which merely a little black blood oozed slowly.

The Midgard serpent recoiled, however. Its opaline eyes flamed with rage. From the jaws of the monster, with a terrific hiss, came a cloud of fine green spray that flew toward Frey. He reeled back, covered by that weird vapor. But I leaped forward, dragging him and Freya ahead. I saw our single chance. The momentary recoil of the serpent had left open the mouth of a corridor on the right!

"Quick!" I cried, pulling them toward the black passage.

Frey seemed blinded by the green spray of the serpent. The monster's vast coils were twitching with rage, its head swaying angrily forward again. But we plunged safely into that branching corridor. It was utterly dark. As we stumbled forward in it, I heard a distant babel of alarm from the upper levels of the Jotun palace.

"The Jotuns will be after us," I cautioned. "Loki will be warned of our escape."

"Jarl Keith, Iormungandr follows us!" Freya cried wildly.

The angry hiss of the giant serpent was echoing from the stone walls. And I could hear the loud rustle and scrape of its scaled body as it glided into the dark passage after us.

No more than a few moments could have passed before we reached the end of the passage. But it seemed ages that we ran in blind, unreasoning terror. Slipping on the mossy, wet stone floor, we could hear the clamor of the far-off alarm grow louder and the hissing rustle of the Midgard snake overtaking us.

Then I collided with a metal door that closed the end of the passage. My heart throbbed as if it would burst as I clawed frantically for the knob. If it were locked, we were trapped here by the serpent....

MY HAND found the catch, and I tore the door open. Outside was the open air. We stared at the night that was filled with curling white fog-mists through which shone the ghostly moon. I pulled Freya and the stunned Frey through and slammed the door shut behind me. The catch fell. Next moment, there was a loud thump against the other side of the door as the Midgard snake's huge head struck it.

We had emerged into one of the courtyards of the great palace. In the vague mists, the squat, brutal bulbs of Jotunheim's structures rose darkly all around us. But now torchlight was flashing from the upper windows of the palace as the alarm spread.

"Which way?" Frey mumbled thickly, gaping about in the shrouding mists, his sword in his unnerved hand.

"This way," I said decisively, leading them toward the left. "It's the next court."

Then I heard the stamp of restless horses on the stone paving of an adjoining court. We ran forward. Frey was staggering like a drunken man as we burst into that adjoining court. Out of the mists loomed a Jotun guard, black-bearded, huge, his face a white blur in the fog.

"Who are you?" he challenged. When he saw the fair hair of my two companions, he uttered a loud cry. "Aesir!"

He struck at me with his sword, but I had the advantage of surprise. I ran in with an upward thrust of my blade, slid past his defense, ripped between the laces of his *brynya*. He collapsed, the alarm bubbling through the blood that filled his throat.

I began running toward the vague shape of my rocket plane, which loomed out of the mist. But suddenly I remembered that the port window had been smashed when I had first landed on the sandy beach below Midgard's frowning cliffs. Flying in the cold, thin air of the Arctic, I might lose consciousness and crash into the sea. In any case, my hands would be too numb to handle the

firing wheel.

"Hold the ship against attack!" I shouted to Frey, handing him the guard's sword.

As I rushed into the cabin, I glimpsed him standing with the sword in his hand, but he was swaying drunkenly. I knew he could not hold off an attack for long, and I dragged on the flying togs I had discarded before climbing to Midgard plateau. The instant I strapped the oxygen tank to my shoulders, I heard Freya's terrified scream.

"Jarl Keith, Frey is swooning, and Jotuns are coming!"

I snatched a super-automatic from the supply compartment and dashed outside. The moon slipped from behind the clouds, shining full on the Jotuns who were rushing up to attack. Horned helmet on his head, sword in hand and the golden mustache writhing above his savage lips. Loki was leading two fierce Jotun soldiers. But Freya was struggling with Frey's almost inert weight. The blade had slipped from his nerveless grasp.

"Get him into the rear of the ship and close the door!" I shouted to the girl.

The Jotun archer drew back the string of his bow to strike me down with a heavy arrow. I picked him off with a single snipe-shot. The pikeman raised his javelin, dropped it as a slug blasted away his skull. Before I could wheel on Loki and end the menace to the Aesir, Freya called to me in despair.

"Jarl Keith, I cannot get him into the ship! He has fainted."

I triggered a shot at Loki, saw him duck swiftly out of the bullet's path. Then I had no more time to fight. I hurled the gun and caught him on the right shoulder. The sword spun from his grip as he staggered back.

Frantically I ran to the cabin door and dragged Frey inside. When I pointed quickly, Freya opened the door of the freight hold while I carried him and laid him down on the floor. I wrapped him in blankets and told Freya to do the same. It would be warmer and

easier to breathe than in the cabin, for the ship was electrically warmed and synthetically oxygenated. But the smashed window of the cabin would leak its own air and warmth, and chill and thin the air of the hold, despite the tightness of the door I closed on them as I sprang back into the pilot room.

Jotun reinforcements were charging up as I opened the jets wide and blasted off. The plane soared into the freezing air, and I was glad I had taken time to don my flying clothes and oxygen tank. Even through my wired suit, I could feel the numbing chill, and my lungs were laboring under the lessened pressure.

FAR below, I saw the glimmering river through the closing mist. The tall masts of Jotun ships looked like dowels. I twisted the firing wheel to top speed, and we rose so steeply that I thought the ship would slip into a tail-spin. But it righted and zoomed higher, rocketing above the misty river and the dark, fog-shrouded forests beyond. When I looked back, the ominous citadel of Jotunheim was alive with moving torches. I could well imagine the blazing anger that Loki would vent upon the Jotuns because of our escape.

"We're clear!" I thought exultantly. "Maybe by now Loki has more respect for outland science."

I set the robot controls and searched through the spare-parts compartment for a new window. Fixing the smashed port was only a few moments' work. Then I opened the oxygen nozzles wide and let the cabin fill with fresh, invigorating air and warmth. I removed my flying togs and opened the freight hold door. Freya and I helped Frey into the cabin, put his limp body in a seat. His blurred eyes looked less helpless, and he sat unsteadily but without collapsing.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

He nodded weakly. "Truly you outlanders have strange powers," he mumbled. "We must warn Odin of the attack . . ."

"Loki means to use those devilish storm-cones to overcome the Aesir," I said. "We've got to devise some defense against that weapon."

I went back to the controls and guided the plane above Midgard's black hills. Freya's frantic voice called to me over the roar of the rocket motor.

"Jarl Keith, Frey has fallen!"

I whipped around. He was lying on the floor, twitching. Then I saw something that horrified me. His body was covered with the green spray which the Midgard snake had spat upon him. Around his bandaged wounds, his flesh was turning black!

"The venom has entered his wounds!" I cried.

I had never thought that a snake the size of Iormungandr could be poisonous. No Earthly serpent larger than nine or ten feet possesses venom. But I had forgotten that Loki's science had developed it to its huge size.

Frey opened his fluttering eyes and stared dully at us. His lips moved feebly.

"I've fought my last fight . . . the poison of the Midgard snake has slain me . . ."

"Try to fight that venom!" I urged hoarsely.

"The Norns have spun out my long life-thread at last—" he mumbled. "I would that I could see Gerda before I pass. But Wyrd ordains otherwise." His blearing eyes grew strangely brilliant and clear for an instant. "Jarl Keith, you have been a worthy comrade. I leave my kinswoman in your care, for I know you love her dearly. Try to save her in the day that approaches—the day of Ragnarok."

Freya sobbed as the Aesir's eyes dilated, as though looking past us at some gigantic, terrifying spectacle.

"I see Loki riding in fire and storm to destroy Asgard—I see the Aesir dying—I see the whole land—"

His eyes closed abruptly, and his jaw sagged as life departed.

Freya turned a quivering, tear-stained face toward me as the plane

thundered northward through the night.

"Jarl Keith, he's dead. My kinsman was so great among the Aesir and has lived so long—now he's dead."

I felt a hard lump in my throat. Handsome, steadfast Frey had been my first friend among the Aesir.

"We cannot help him now, Freya," I said. "Damn Loki and his fiendish schemes!"

"Aye," said Freya bitterly. "My kinsman is but the first of many Aesir who must fall because the arch-fiend has been loosed."

"And that happened only because I brought the rune key into Asgard," I said in heavy self-reproach. "I have been an evil guest to the Aesir, Freya."

She clasped my hand. "Do not think thus, Jarl Keith! It is not your fault that Loki's powers brought you and the fateful rune key here. Sooner or later, he would have accomplished it somehow. All my people have always feared that."

DAWN was paling in the sky. During the last half hour, we had flown over most of the length of Midgard. Against the rose-flushed sky a few miles north of us stood the high, lofty little island of Asgard, with its eyrie of gray castles amid which Valhalla loomed mountainously. Already the flying arch of Bifrost Bridge was glittering as the short polar spring night ended.

"We'll have to land on the field this side of the bridge," I mused. "There's not room enough to land safely in Asgard."

I brought the plane down safely on the bare plain of the mainland promontory. As we emerged from it, over Bifrost Bridge from Asgard a long stream of Aesir warriors came galloping. At their head rode a yellow-haired, yellow-bearded giant, his great hammer swinging.

"Thor has seen us and he comes!" Freya exclaimed.

In a few moments, Thor and the Aesir warriors reached us. The horsemen

seemed awed by sight of my flying craft.

"Jarl Keith and Freya!" cried the Hammerer, his small eyes joyful as he quickly recognized us. "But where is Frey?"

"Dead," I said bitterly. "Slain in Jotunheim by the poison of the Midgard snake."

Thor looked into the plane at the dead figure as though unable to believe his ears. He whispered blankly:

"Frey, who has ridden and sailed by my side these many centuries—dead!" Wild rage crimsoned his face, and he shook the great hammer Miolnir aloft. "Loki's work! Aye, these are the first fruits of that devil's freedom!"

"Loki prepares to lead the Jotuns upon Asgard," I warned him. "Tomorrow that host of dread evil comes against us, Thor!"

"Good! The sooner the better!" He turned to his Aesir warriors, who were still staring awedly at the plane. "Take the lord Frey and place him on a shield. He goes home to Asgard as a warrior should."

As Freya stood beside me, her blue eyes were bright with unshed tears as she watched them silently remove Frey's body and lay it gently upon a big shield. I put my arm around the girl comfortingly. But she did not weep now. The Viking strain was too strong in her. Though her red lips quivered, she watched steadily as the Aesir warriors lifted the shield that bore Frey's body.

We started back toward Asgard, following the warriors bearing the shield. Thor, Freya, the warriors and I walked slowly behind, leading the horses. We reached the promontory at the end of Midgard. When we started over the incredible, unrailed stone span of Bifrost Bridge, the sea was washing loud a thousand feet below us. And as we marched, the Aesir warriors behind us struck their sword hilts against their shields in a clanging funeral rhythm.

Up the arch of the Bifrost Bridge we paced to the slow, sorrowful rhythm of

that clanging. In the castle which guarded the Asgard end of the bridge, the great gates swung open for our entrance. And from the tower above the gates, we saw Heimdall blow a long, low, mournful note on the great Giellar horn.

So we passed in the brightening sunrise through the gates into Asgard, ringed round by the castles of the Aesir nobles perched upon the cliffs, dominated by the huge pile of Valhalla. Inside the gates, a hastily gathered group of the Aesir met us.

Odin was foremost. The strong, stern face of the Aesir king grew taut and strange. His eyes clouded darkly as he saw the burden upon the shield.

"So Frey has fallen to the evil of Loki and his familiars," Odin muttered. "Now I know that Wyrd stoops low over us. The Norns spin out the end of their thread for many in this land."

"Frey and I did all we could to prevent the release of Loki, Lord Odin," I said. "But we failed."

"You could not succeed," Odin said broodingly. "It was written that Loki would be loosed. How soon does he come with the Jotuns against Asgard?"

"Tomorrow," I answered. "And he will be armed with his storm-cones to loose tempest and lightning upon us."

"We must prepare a defense," declared Odin. "Now bear Frey's body to his castle."

XIX

FUR solemn little procession wound across Asgard, through the streets of stone houses, past great Valhalla castle. We moved miserably toward the castle on the eastern cliffs where Frey and his line dwelt. As we approached its entrance, the lady Gerda stood waiting to meet us. The lovely face of Frey's wife went pale as she saw the stiff figure on the shield. But she did not falter.

"My lord comes home for the last time," she said quietly in the deep silence. "Bring him in."

Gerda walked beside us, her eyes fixed on Frey's dead form, as we entered the castle. We took him into the great hall of the castle, a high-roofed, big stone chamber. There the shield that bore his body was laid across wooden trestles that had been hastily procured.

I tried to speak a word of consolation to Gerda and could not. Her strange eyes seemed not to see any of us, but remained fixed on her dead husband. She had seated herself in a chair by the body. With hands folded in her lap, she stared wordlessly. Freya plucked my arm as I stood, swaying from exhaustion. The girl's eyes were bright with tears.

"We cannot soothe her grief, Jarl Keith," she whispered. "And you are weary to the soul. You must sleep."

"Aye, sleep," boomed Thor, his heavy voice rumbling ominously. "For tomorrow we shall need every arm in Asgard."

I let *thralls* lead me to a small chamber in the castle. Hardly had I flung myself upon its hide bed when I was sinking into a slumber of utter physical and nervous fatigue. My dreams were troubled. Again I seemed to be facing Loki's beautiful face and the snarling wolf Fenris. Again I saw Frey confronting the venomous Midgard snake. And again, like a dim echo from far away, the dying gasp of Frey reverberated in my brain.

"I see Loki riding in fire and storm to destroy Asgard—I see the Aesir dying—"

I awoke with a shuddering start. The sun was setting. I had slept through the day. A *thrall* had touched my shoulder to awaken me.

"The lady Freya bade me rouse you. It is time for the lord Frey's funeral."

HASTILY I donned my mail coat and helmet and buckled on my sword. Then I went down to the lower floor of the castle and looked into the hall that was now growing dusky with twilight.

Gerda still sat exactly where I had left her. Hands folded unmovingly, her lovely face was a strange, immobile mask as she looked at the body of her husband upon the shield.

Freya touched my arm. The girl had donned her own short mail tunic and helmet. Again she was the warrior maid I had first met. Her white face was composed.

"We give Frey burial now, Jarl Keith," she said. "The shield-bearers come. You should be one of them."

Thor, dark-faced, brooding-eyed Tyr the *berserk*, and sad, noble-looking young Forseti had entered. We entered the hall where Gerda watched her dead.

"It is time, Lady Gerda," said Thor softly.

"That is well," she said in a calm voice.

We lifted the shield that bore Frey's body. Carrying it high upon our shoulders, we paced slowly out of the castle, Freya and Gerda following.

The gloom of early dusk lay over Asgard. A strong wind blew keen and cold from the northwest, wailing around the lofty cliffs. Warriors in companies of hundreds waited outside, clad in full armor. As we passed them, they took up their place behind our cortege. They marched after us, striking their sword-hilts against their shields in that clangorous dirge.

We wound along the edge of the cliff to the stair that led down to the fjord. At the head of the stair, on the cliff-edge, were gathered Odin and his lady Frigga, old Aegir and Ran, Bragi and all the other Aesir nobles.

"Farewell, Frey," said Odin. "You have gone first into the shades, but others follow soon."

From the warriors who had followed us, from all the Aesir-folk, echoed that solemn sorrow.

"Farewell, Lord Frey!"

Now we four started down the steep and narrow stair that was chiseled from the cliffside. Only Gerda and Freya followed us. The wind blew in great gusts,

booming and moaning around the cliffs in the twilight. Thus we came down to the deep, narrow fjord in which floated the long dragon-ships of the Aesir. Among them, Frey's ship stood ready to give him Viking burial. It was trimmed and stacked with wood, and a low, broad wooden platform had been built amidships.

We stepped aboard and laid the shield that bore Frey's body upon that platform. Thor put Frey's sword in the dead hand. Then Frey's black horse was led into the bow of the ship. Tyr's dagger flashed, and the horse fell dead.

"Now all is ready," Thor rumbled.

We stepped back onto the shore.

"All is not yet ready," said Gerda calmly.

She stepped past us to the platform where her husband lay. When she looked down at him, her lovely face was strangely happy.

"For long," she said quietly, "my lord has lived with me at his side. He could not go on this journey into the dead without me."

BEFORE any of us could move, she drew a dagger from her robe and sheathed it in her heart. We watched rigidly as she fell upon the platform. Her golden hair fell across Frey's dead face.

Freya broke into wild sobbing and clung to me. We stared in horror and pity, but Thor lifted his great hammer in salute.

"Skoal to the lady Gerda!" he rumbled. "She goes proudly to death with her lord, like a true Viking."

Tyr slashed the mooring of the ship. Then he took a waiting torch from a socket and tossed it into the resinous wood with which the ship was filled. The pile blazed up with a crackling roar, casting a red, quivering light through the deepening twilight. We bent our shoulders against the stern. The ship of death forged out on the heaving waves. Then, as the wind took its raised sail, it sprang forward like a

thing alive.

Back we climbed to Asgard, my arm supporting Freya. At the top of the cliff, we stood with Odin and the other Aesir. By the light of many torches, we gazed silently at the burial ship of Frey and Gerda. Blazing red with flames, its high sail carrying it before the swift wind, the ship drove south over the heaving black waves.

"Viking funeral for a true Viking man and his mate!" Odin declared.

Thor raised his hammer into the air. His red face was even redder by the light of the distant fire ship.

"Thy spirit hear my vow, Frey!" boomed the giant. "It was slimy Iormungandr, Loki's evil snake, that slew thee. I swear to rid Earth of that Midgard serpent in the coming battle, or die myself. Wyrd binds me to that oath!"

The blazing ship that bore the bodies of Frey and Gerda was now far away upon the dark sea. A great torch of red fire, it was still scudding southward before the wind. Then we saw the ship's prow dip. The whole burning craft plunged down beneath the waves.

"So passes the lord Frey and his mate," said Odin's heavy voice in the silence that followed. "And now, jarls and warriors of the Aesir, we must prepare ourselves. The hosts of the Jotuns come upon the morrow, led by evil Loki, to destroy us."

"We hold Asgard safe while we live, lord Odin!" cried Bragi.

All the voices shouted chorus. I, too, joined that shout, fierce desire for vengeance on Loki and the Jotuns burning in me strongly. Only one of us did not join in that fierce yell, and that was Tyr. The *berserk* still stood gazing out into the windy night, his dark, brooding face unfathomable.

"Tonight we hold feast in Valhalla as ever," Odin was saying. "Now I go to prepare that which may snatch victory from Loki's grasp. Son Thor, come you with me—and you also, Jarl Keith."

The Aesir king strode with Frigga

and his stalwart sons, giant Thor, Vidar and Vali, back toward the black, looming bulk of Valhalla castle. The other Aesir nobles and warriors slowly dispersed toward their own castles and homes. I remained with Freya on the edge of the cliff. The chill darkness seemed alive with voices, with winds that boomed and wailed about Asgard's cliffs as though bemoaning something to come.

Freya crept into my arms. No longer was she the fierce, proud Viking maid who had watched the burial of her kinsman and his mate. A trembling girl, she felt even as I the shadow of colossal disaster deepening with inevitable swiftness over us.

"Hold me close, Jarl Keith," she whispered. "I fear that when tomorrow night comes, we may be separated forever."

"No!" I exclaimed fiercely. "Whether living or dead, Freya, you and I shall be together."

In the darkness, her blue eyes shone up at me with bright tenderness. Her cold little hand touched my cheek. I kissed her quivering lips. We clung together in the frigid darkness, the moaning wind wrapping around us both the dark cloak I wore over my armor.

We could hear the trampling of feet, the clanging of hammers beating out spears and arrowheads, the bustle of activity as the warships below were prepared. All the stir of preparation was for the coming battle. Freya raised her bright golden head with proud gladness.

"Come Loki and all his evil hosts, come the end of Asgard itself, and I shall not weep now," she whispered tensely. "Beloved who came to me from beyond the ice, we are one till time ends." She stepped back. "You must answer the summons of lord Odin. We meet again at the feast tonight."

My heart was throbbing with pride and gladness as I turned from her and hurried across Asgard to Valhalla castle...

DIN and Thor were waiting for me in the great hall of Valhalla. The stern, iron-strong face of the Aesir king was heavy. At he spoke, I could hear the bustle of preparation, the clatter of shields and spears and hurrying feet throughout the great castle.

"Jarl Keith, I shall not hide from you that Asgard is in dire peril. The Jotun hosts outnumber us by many to one. Though we might repulse them, if that were all, they will be led by cunning Loki and aided by the storm-weapons of which you spoke."

I nodded wordlessly, for all this knowledge had weighed on my own mind through these last hours.

"It is necessary, unless Asgard is to perish," Odin continued, "that I devise some defense against those storm-cones. Otherwise they would blast our forces and make us easy prey."

"Can you prepare a defense against them, Lord Odin?" I asked hopefully.

"I think I can," said Odin, gravely thoughtful. "I possess as much of the ancient science of our race as Loki, remember, though I have not probed into unholy researches as he did. Tell me, what did you learn of the nature of his storm-cones?"

Rapidly I told Odin and Thor what Loki himself had related to me of those amazing devices. They could project a controlled electric field to any desired spot and cause an abnormal difference of electric potential between that place and the sky. The result would be a blasting discharge of lightning.

"Ah, I understand now," Odin muttered. "Loki has found a way to draw power from the static electric charge of Earth, transform and project it in a controlled field. Truly he is a daring scientist, as always."

"Curse him and his devil's tricks!" growled Thor. "I always mistrusted him, even in the ancient days in Muspelheim."

"Couldn't there be some way of creat-

ing an electric energy field that would screen out Loki's projected field?" I asked Odin eagerly, with great anxiety.

"You have divined the only possible defense, Jarl Keith." Odin nodded. "And I could soon build a mechanism to create such a screen of energy. But it would take tremendous power to operate it. Only controlled disintegration of a large mass of intensively radioactive matter could yield such power as that."

"You said once, Lord Odin, that there are tremendous masses of radioactive matter in the deep world from which the Aesir originally came."

Odin's stare narrowed. "Are you suggesting that we could get the radioactive substances from Muspelheim?"

"That's my idea," I stated. "You told me that there was a way down into Muspelheim. It was a way by which the Aesir originally came up and which Loki later used for his researches in the atomic fires below."

"It is true," Odin said slowly. "There is such a path down to Muspelheim, though it is a perilous and fearful one to follow. The opening to that path is in the deepest chamber of this castle. When we emerged here long ago, we built Valhalla over it. And it is the same way that Loki used to descend and tamper with the atomic fires below, until we discovered what he was doing and banished him."

"But it would be deadly dangerous for anyone to go down that way to Muspelheim and seek to bring back radioactive matter. For that deep-buried world is a place of awful, raging atomic fires. The terrific radiation is such that it streams even up through Earth's crust into this land."

"I know, but a lead garment of sufficient thickness would protect me from the radiation," I said earnestly. "I know that from my own science. Let me go on this mission, lord Odin!"

HE HESITATED. "The lead suits

which Loki used for his secret des-

cents into Muspelheim are still here," he muttered. "It might be done, Jarl Keith. I will go with you on this perilous trip."

But Thor shook his great, shaggy head.

"No, Father, you must not go," the Hammerer declared. "You must be here to take command if Loki's forces attack before tomorrow. And you will also need all the available time to build the mechanism of which you and Jarl Keith speak." He turned to me. "I will go with Jarl Keith down into Muspelheim."

Odin assented reluctantly.

"So be it, then, though I dislike to send you, Jarl Keith, upon this fearful mission. The fight is for the sake of our people, not yours."

"The Aesir are my people, now and always, if you will let me claim the privilege!"

Odin's iron face softened, and he laid his great hand on my shoulder.

"Jarl Keith, I welcome you as one of us. Weal or woe, life or death, you are outlander no longer, but jarl and captain of the Aesir."

Hard-headed American scientist or not, I felt pride such as I had never felt before, to be accepted into the company of these mighty men.

"Now we go down to the chamber that holds the mouth of the terrible road to Muspelheim," Odin said. "Come!"

Thor and I followed him out of the great hall and through corridors. We descended dark stone stairs until we reached the deepest level of Valhalla castle. We came to a door carved with runes and with a great lock upon it. Odin touched the runes in a certain combination, and the door swung slowly inward.

By the light of the torch Thor carried, I saw that we had entered a round stone chamber of considerable size. It was dank and dusty, as though unused for ages. Standing about were dust-covered instruments and mechanisms of copper, quartz and iron which I guessed

were long unused devices of the ancient Aesir science.

In the very center of the big chamber's stone floor yawned a pit fifty feet in diameter, sinking to unguessable depths. Up from that opening beat a fierce green glow of throbbing force. From somewhere far beneath I heard a dim, remote, roaring sound.

Most strange of all, in the opening of that pit floated a twenty-foot disk of white metal, with a squat, thick standard of metal rising from its center. It poised in the radiation, apparently without support, rocking gently as the fierce green rays from below streamed up through it.

"What in the world is that?" I asked startledly.

"That is the chariot on which you and Thor will ride down the road to deep Muspelheim," Odin explained. "And yon pit in which the disk floats is the road itself."

Odin looked somberly about the dusty room and its looming, enigmatic mechanisms.

"This is the very heart of Asgard, Jarl Keith. Up that pitroad the Aesir came long ago, fleeing from disaster-stricken Muspelheim. Over the opening of this road I caused Valhalla castle to be built. And secretly, from this chamber, Loki came and went to Muspelheim in the perilous researches that caused his exile, using the floating disk which he had devised to come and go easily."

Thor was looking in obvious dislike at the metal disk that was rocking eerily in empty air at the edge of the pit.

"I've not ridden that disk since we caught Loki in his secret researches," rumbled the bearded giant. "I've not much desire to repeat the trip, but I suppose it has to be done."

"Here are the lead suits, Jarl Keith," called Odin.

I WENT to the side of the chamber to which the Aesir king had gone. He had reached down, from hooks on which

they hung, two of the four strange garments which had hung there, gathering dust for long. The garments were stiff robes of heavy but oddly flexible lead, falling to the ankles, with leaden boots for the feet and leaden gloves for the hands. A hoodlike cowl of the same material went over the head and had two eye-holes of heavily leaded glass for vision.

"These are the suits which Loki and the *thralls* he forced to help him used in the fiendish researches below," Odin said. "When Loki was forced to flee Asgard, he had to leave these behind him."

I examined the heavy garments.

"They ought to be proof against any ordinary radiation," I muttered. "But we've got to have something in which to bring back the mass of radioactive matter."

Odin nodded understandingly.

"Yon crucible should serve the purpose. Put it on the disk, Thor."

The crucible was a big one of lead, and so heavy that even huge Thor grunted as he lifted it. He staggered with it to the floating disk. It rocked a little as he put the crucible on it, then quieted. Thor and I each donned one of the protective suits. The lead garments were so heavy that I felt crushed, and I could see only dimly through the dark glass of the eye-holes. Odin handed each of us a stout iron staff.

"Thor, you know from long ago how to operate the disk," he told his huge son. "While you are gone, I shall begin converting one of these mechanisms into a generator whose energy may screen us from Loki's storm-cones in the coming battle."

"We'll get the stuff to operate that generator or not come back," I promised.

The Aesir king's iron-strong face was anxious.

"I pray the Norns that you return with it, Jarl Keith."

Thor had stepped out onto the floating disk. I followed, moving stiffly in my hampering garments, and feeling

more than a little uneasy as I boarded the disk which floated in empty air.

"Crouch by the standard with me, Jarl Keith," came Thor's muffled voice. "Cling to the hand-grips."

I followed his example and crouched down beside the squat pillar which rose from the center of the disk. Upon that pillar was a single lever, movable in a graduated slot, which seemed to be the only control of the strange vehicle. There were projecting handgrips on the pillar and across the whole disk, for passengers to cling to. Thor's lead-gloved hand clutched the lever and moved it slightly. It operated a simple mechanical device which slid open scores of tiny doors in the disk, which until now had been half-open.

At once the disk began to fall into the pit. Faster and faster we fell, the air whistling around us, and the blazing green radiation streaming violently up through the many tiny openings in the disk.

"How in the world does this thing operate?" I shouted to Thor over the roar of air. "Is it by radiation-pressure?"

I heard his muffled answer.

"You have guessed it, Jarl Keith. The metal of this disk is one that is extremely light and opaque to radiation. The pressure of the radiation from below is so terrifically powerful as to drive the disk upward. By opening the little doors and controlling the radiation through the disk, the vehicle can be poised motionless against the pressure, or caused to fall."

"Certainly Loki is a clever scientist, to have devised such a thing," I declared.

THOR growled an answer, but I could not hear. The whistling wind and din, thunderous roaring from far below were growing louder. We were falling at an appalling speed, straight down the pit. It was a ride wild beyond imagination, with the air shrieking like fiends, and the fierce green rays streaming up around us. Through every fiber of my

body, even though I wore the protective lead suit, tingled stronger vibrations of the stimulating force I had felt since entering this land. It was wildly exciting and intoxicating.

Thor's big, lead-clothed figure crouched, his gloved hand on the control lever. His cowled head was bent as he peered tautly down through a square quartz plate in the bottom of the disk. A giddy sensation akin to nausea shook me, so swift now was our fall.

"We approach Muspelheim!" came Thor's bellow over the roar and shriek. "Hold tightly, Jarl Keith!"

His hand moved the lever in its slot, the tiny doors in the bottom of the disk closed a little. Our fall began to slow. Pressed hard against the disk, crushed by the deceleration, I peered down through the quartz view-plate with Thor. The end of the vertical pit was close below. I saw, beneath it, a vast, fiery space.

The disk slowed further, as Thor moved the lever. Finally it hung motionless again, its weight just balanced by the pressure of radiation from below. It had halted just where the vertical pit debounced into the roof of an inconceivably vast, blazing space. An underworld of terrible atomic radiance stretched away for miles from the rock wall beside which the pit entered.

"You look upon deep Muspelheim." Thor's voice reached me muffledly. "Once the home of the Aesir, it is the home now of the atomic fires and the creatures of the fires."

The scene before me was indescribably awe-inspiring. The vast dimensions of this mighty space beneath Earth's crust were enough to stagger the mind. This was no mere cavern, but rather an enormous hollow such as might have been left under the planet's surface when, as some believed, the moon had broken away and hurtled into space.

The rocky roof was a mile above the floor. Our disk had halted just where the vertical pit entered the roof, close

beside one rock wall of the great space. From the spot where Thor and I gazed, the subterranean world stretched off out of sight, to right and left ahead.

Many miles away from us there shone a dazzling thing that dominated the whole vast, blazing cave with its brilliance. It was a colossal fountain of cold, white fire that gushed from a chasm in the floor. Hundreds of feet into the air it rose, falling back on itself in continual blinding spray. From it shot beams and banners of blinding light and force, a shaking, shuddering radiance.

All across this eerie underworld rose similar, but smaller, geysers of white fire, gushing jets of radiance like that mighty distant one. Wherever the eye turned, it encountered such fiery fountains. They filled the underworld with a roaring that was deafening, and a terrific green-white radiance.

"Can your people ever have lived here?" I cried shakenly to Thor, as I gazed stupefiedly from the floating disk.

"Aye, Jarl Keith. Centuries ago we dwelt here, where we had evolved and lived for ages. But then this was a fair world. There was no fire except that one great atomic fountain which you see far away. It was smaller then than now, yet its radiations were sufficient to keep this whole underworld warm and habitable.

"Then accursed Loki tampered with our fire fountain. He sought to stimulate it to greater activity, so that its increased radiations would make us almost immortal. He so disturbed and aroused the fountain that its fires shot up and fell here and there, all across the underworld. Eventually it set masses of radioactive matter everywhere to blazing up in atomic flame themselves.

"Thus we had to flee from disaster-smitten Muspelheim. We managed to pierce the pit up to the upper world, and clambered up it by a toilsome stair carved in its side. And since then Muspelheim has been a world of fire, forsaken by men."

I was so stunned by the awesome

spectacle that I had almost forgotten our mission here. But Thor recalled it to me.

"We must not stay here long, Jarl Keith!" he warned. "The intense radiation here would slay us if it penetrated our leaden suits."

I glanced down.

"There must be plenty of radioactive matter here, all right," I said. "But how do we get down to the floor?"

"By this stair. It's part of the ancient way by which my people escaped to the upper world."

I saw now that the disk had halted beside the landing of a stair which was chiseled from the rock wall of the underworld. The stair climbed up from the floor and disappeared into the pit-shaft by which we had descended.

Hastily, fully awakening to the peril of remaining long in this hell of fierce radiation, I helped Thor pick up the leaden crucible we had brought. We stepped from the disk to the landing, and started down the stair. It was hard walking in our cumbersome lead garments, and with the weight of the crucible to carry. Moreover, the stair was without any protective rail, and perilously narrow.

XVI

WHEN we reached the floor of the underworld, we stood within a hundred yards of one of the many geysers of atomic fire. Though half-blinded by its brilliance, I was able to see that it jetted from a mass of radioactive mineral the normally slow disintegration of which had been tremendously accelerated. It had been kindled to this faster disintegration, I knew, by the flame that had fallen from the central fountain.

"We shall have to find a radioactive deposit unkindled as yet," I called to Thor.

He nodded his lead-cowled head vigorously.

"Let us try this direction, Jarl Keith."

We stumbled with the crucible be-

tween the geysers of atomic flame. Sometimes we were forced to go so near one of the jets that its inconceivably powerful radiation seemed bound to penetrate our suits. Dazzled even through my lead-glass eye-holes by the raging brilliance, every fiber of my body tingling, I searched desperately for such a deposit as we required. If our suits should be penetrated, we would die horrible deaths.

"This way, Thor!" I called suddenly as I found a mass of mineral in a niche in the broken rock floor.

It was glowing with a soft light that seemed feeble in comparison with the flaming atomic fountains. I recognized it as an isotope of radium itself, never found in a natural state in my own upper world.

"There's more than enough of the stuff here, if we can dig it out!" I exclaimed. "We'll have to use our staffs."

The iron pikes we carried were ill-adapted to digging out the hard, glowing mineral. But we set to work, prying out chunks of the stuff and tossing them into the crucible. As I straightened once, panting for breath, I glimpsed an amazing sight in the middle distance.

Around one of the geysers were circling and flitting a dozen things that looked like swirling spheres of light.

"Those things look as though they were *alive!*" I yelled in horror.

Thor straightened to see.

"Flame-children!" he exclaimed, his muffled voice suddenly anxious. He turned to me hastily. "They are alive, in a way. But it is not life like ours. They are creatures evolved somehow from the flaming radiation of this underworld of atomic fires. We believe they consist of force currents that cohere in a permanent pattern, which possess powers of movement and perhaps dim intelligence. We don't know much about them, for they've evolved here since the Aesir left poor Muspelheim."

"They look beautiful, like flame-

winged birds of light," I said, staring in awe and fascination.

"They're dangerous, Jarl Keith—pure concentrated atomic energy!" warned the Hammerer. "We must be gone before they find us."

I redoubled my toil of helping to dig out the radioactive chunks. We had the crucible half full of the precious mineral when I felt a terrific shock of force against my back. I whirled around, uttered a cry. One of the dazzling flame-children was poised behind me, had just touched my suit. The mere touch of the weird creature had burned almost through the thick lead!

"We've got to get out," bellowed Thor. "The thing has almost pierced your suit. The radiation will penetrate it in a few minutes, and you'll die—"

"But we haven't all the radioactive matter that Odin will need," I protested.

"We have most of it. If you perish here, we'll never even get this much back to him. Quick, up the stair to the disk!"

He grabbed the crucible's handle. Reluctantly I took the other handle and started with him toward the stair. As we hastened with our heavy load between the roaring geysers of atomic fire, I looked back. The one of the flame-children that had touched me experimentally was now joining several other dazzling creatures like itself, and drifting swiftly after us.

Hastily we started up the stair. With some relief, I saw that the flame-children did not follow us but drifted on and started circling and flitting around another of the fire fountains. Apparently the dim intelligence of the creatures, if indeed they possessed such, had lost interest in us.

PANTING and exhausted, we reached the landing and set the crucible down on the floating disk. Thor hastily adjusted the control to make up for the increased weight on it. As he crouched down preparatory to starting up the shaft, I noticed something.

"Thor, what is that door up there, high in the roof?"

He turned his gaze to follow my pointing finger. The door looked like a massive sliding sheet of dull metal, set in the roof of the underworld some distance from us. There was a shielded mechanism of some kind set in the rock door, obviously controlling it.

"That is the forbidden research upon which Loki was engaged, and which caused us to banish him from Asgard," Thor explained. "Above that door is a tunnel connecting with the sea of the upper world. If the door were opened, sea water would rush down into this under-world."

"Good God!" I cried in horror. "If sea water ever poured down into this world of fire, there'd be an explosion that would shake the planet!"

"Aye, and Odin saw the danger," Thor said. "Loki planned to admit only enough sea water to produce the titanic power which he needed for his experiments. But Odin pointed out that if anything went wrong—if this door were completely opened and the sea rushed down unchecked into Muspelheim—there would be such an explosion as would rend the whole land above. It was the reason for Loki's banishment."

As Thor spoke, he was moving the control lever. The floating disk began to rise in the vertical shaft, out of the fiery under-world. With all the tiny valve-doors closed, it rose quickly under the pressure of the powerful radiation. We shot up the dark shaft at a speed that almost equaled that of our descent.

We were none too soon. A savage pain in my back told me that the radiation had just been starting to penetrate my weakened protective garment. Already it had scorched my flesh!

Clinging to the rocking, rising disk, I held the crucible to keep it from sliding away. The radioactive matter in it shed a feeble glow upon the dark walls of the pit as they raced downward. Then Thor slowed our rise, and finally the disk came to a halt at the mouth of the shaft.

Again we were in the torchlit chamber under Valhalla castle.

Odin was awaiting us. The Aesir king uttered an exclamation of relief as Thor and I stumbled off the disk with the crucible and removed our stiff garments.

"Lord Odin, I fear we didn't get all the radioactive fuel you'll need for your mechanism," I said bitterly. "It was my fault that we were forced to leave—"

Odin looked with a shadow of worry in his eye at the half-filled crucible. But he spoke confidently to me.

"It should be enough, Jarl Keith, to defend us from Loki's storm weapons. See, I have converted another mechanism into such a generator as we will need for that defense."

The mechanism was concealed by a spherical copper cover upon which was mounted a smaller copper ball. There was a hopper in its side, into which we poured the chunks of glowing mineral.

"It should have power enough to maintain a defensive screen against the force of Loki's storm-cones for a short time," Odin said. "If he should use the storm-cones for longer than that—"

He did not finish, but I shared the deep worry that was etched in his strong face.

"I saw Loki's handiwork below," I said, and described the sliding door in the roof of the fire-world, which Loki had designed to admit sea water. "No wonder you cast Loki out for such a terrifically dangerous plan."

"Aye, it was Baldur who discovered that plan, and was slain by Loki for exposing it," Odin said somberly. "Loki had perfected a remote control for that sliding door, operating by tuned vibration. Here it is."

AND Odin showed me, among the many dust-covered instruments in the chamber, a small, square, silver box. On it was mounted a knob whose pointer could be turned along a semi-circular scale.

"Turning this knob would open the

sea-door a bit or wide," the Aesir king said. "When Loki fled from Asgard, he took this control box with him. And when we trapped him in that cave below Midgard, and were about to kill him, Loki threatened to open the sea-gate wide and destroy us all. That was why we had to agree not to kill him, if he would surrender this control box to us. He did surrender it. We kept our word and did not kill him, but placed him in the suspended animation in which he lay for so long—until you came with the key. . . ."

Odin went to the door and called up through the corridors for some of his *thralls* to come. When they came, he bade them carry out the big spherical copper generator.

"We shall place it on Vigrid field, on the mainland across Bifrost Bridge," he said, "and keep it under guard tonight. For it is there that we must make our stand against Loki's forces when they come in all their fury."

He, Thor and I followed the *thralls* through Valhalla castle and out into the windy, gusty night. Torch-bearing *thralls* went ahead to illuminate the way. Lights shone from all the castles of Asgard. The moon was hidden by driving clouds as we moved in a little torchlit group across the giddy span of Bifrost to the flat field on the opposite promontory.

My plane was still where I had landed. Aesir warriors and mounted scouts were on guard, watching toward the south for the first approach of Loki and the Jotun horde. As Odin directed the placing of the copper mechanism, I went to my plane. Something had occurred to me which might enable me to devise an additional weapon for the coming battle.

In the plane were the half dozen big signal rockets which were to be used in case I made a forced landing and had to summon help. I began taking the rockets apart, pouring out the gunpowder in them, and carefully unfixing the detonators. At the end of a half

hour, I had made three crude hand grenades or small bombs. I hoped they might be of some use against the Jotuns, who knew nothing of explosives. I left the bombs in the plane and emerged to find Thor waiting for me.

"My father has already returned to Asgard," the Hammerer told me. "And it is time we followed him, for our nightly Valhalla feast begins soon."

"Thor, what of tomorrow's battle?" I asked. "If it comes to sword and spear, with the Jotuns outnumbering us many times, what can we do?"

"We can triumph or we can die!" boomed the giant. "And if it is death—well, the Aesir have lived long and are not afraid to die, so long as we take our enemies with us." He tossed his great hammer in the air and caught it in outstretched hand, as easily as though it were a willow wand. "Be not impatient, Miolnir. "You'll not thirst long. And now to Valhalla, Jarl Keith."

Valhalla was blazing with torchlight when we entered it. Logs in the great hearth burned high. In the flickering torchlight, all the captains and great warriors of the Aesir were gathered at the many tables. The Aesir nobles were appearing, striding toward the high table on the dais. I took my place beside Freya. Beyond her were the two empty seats of Frey and Gerda, then Bragi and Idun, Old Aegir and his wife, and brooding, silent Tyr.

Odin and Frigga entered, and we all stood up. The Aesir king's eye surveyed us with stern pride.

"Be seated, jarls and captains," he boomed. "Let us eat and drink as of old. Though war and death surge upon us tomorrow, yet is there no fear in our hearts."

"Skoal to Odin!" rang Forseti's deep voice.

We seized our drinking-horns and raised them high to a crashing shout of confidence and pride.

"Skoal to the king!"

We drained the mead and sat down. The tall serving-maidens hastened to

bring us more drink and meat. The din of voices and laughter rang forth, loud as ever. The deepening shadow of dire disaster which lay over Asgard that night intensified, rather than lessened, the merriment of the feast. Horn after horn of the potent mead we drank.

Beside me, Freya's blue eyes clung to my face. The shadowed tenderness and love in them was more heart-stirring to me than all else.

"Come good or ill, Freya," I whispered, "it is worth having lived to sit here tonight with you and your people."

"Aye, Jarl Keith," she replied. But there was wistfulness in her voice as she added: "I would that I could foretell our sitting here again tomorrow."

Suddenly all the cheery voices died. Into the hall strode tall Heimdall, warder of Asgard's gates.

"Why are you here, Heimdall?" Odin asked. "Is it not your task tonight to watch over Bifrost Bridge and sound the great blast on Giellar horn when the enemy approach?"

"Lord Odin, Loki has sent a herald to us," Heimdall answered. "That herald, the Jotun king Utgar, I have admitted under truce. He waits to enter."

Fierce passion leaped into every face as the men reached for their weapons. Thor raised his great hammer menacingly, but Odin spoke with stern calm.

"Let the herald of Loki enter."

Utgard came alone in Valhalla's blazing torchlight. Yet the big, black-bearded Jotun king came swaggering, bearing himself like a conqueror as he strode up to our table where the nobles of the Aesir sat.

XVII

UTGAR'S brutal face showed no sign of fear as he met the fiery gaze of his deadly enemies. He spoke to Odin, his coarse, rasping voice loud with utter confidence.

"I bring a message from Lord Loki, ruler of Midgard and soon to be ruler of Asgard."

A fierce exclamation went up from every throat. But Odin's stern face did not change as he replied.

"Speak Loki's message."

"These are the words of Loki," Utgar said loudly. "'Odin and the other Aesir, the time of your downfall has come. I whom you cast out long ago, whom you imprisoned for centuries, am now free and thirsty for vengeance. Tomorrow I come against you with the Jotuns. We shall have three warriors for each warrior of yours, three ships for each of your ships. You cannot stand against us.'

"But because I was once one of your blood, I shall offer you your lives. If you swear to submit to me as your ruler, if you become my subjects as the Jotuns are and crown me your king in Valhalla hall, then shall you retain your lives. Think well before you refuse this offer. If you refuse it, I shall utterly destroy you all.' These are the words of Loki. What answer, Lord Odin?"

"I'll answer now with Mjolnir!" Thor roared, rising with crimson rage on his face.

A fierce chorus of yells from every throat there, including my own, seconded his cry. But Odin waved us to silence. He spoke slowly, solemnly, gazing gravely down at Utgar.

"Take this answer to Loki, Jotun. Tell him that he knows well the Aesir will never yield to his demands. We will fight until our swords break in our hands, until our hands be shorn away, until our breath is no more in us. But we will not take back among us the murderer Loki who long ago proved traitor to our race."

"And tell Loki this also. Tell him that he shall never—even though he and his Jotun hosts utterly overcome us—reap profit from his work. For I say that before that shall happen, all this land will quail beneath destruction. Flame and death shall eat up Midgard and Asgard alike, and all the Jotuns and the Aesir. Tell the arch-traitor that!"

Involuntarily Utgar recoiled from the

dark, dreadful menace in Odin's voice. Then the Jotun king drew his huge figure scornfully erect.

"Think not that our lord will be frightened by such words," he retorted. "You have asked for doom, and doom you shall have."

He turned to go, but Tyr, the brooding berserk, stepped in front of him.

"You know me, Utgar," said Tyr in a slow, bitter voice. "Look for me in tomorrow's battle. I will look for you."

"Come and find me, then, Aesir," laughed Utgar savagely. "Too long have I heard of your valor. Tomorrow I'll test it with my sword." Utgar strode proudly out of the hall, Heimdall following. In the silence, we heard the Jotun king gallop across Asgard to Bifrost Bridge and the echo of his mount's hoofs faded in the distance.

"Let the feast go on," bade Odin at last.

Drinking commenced again, the fierce babel of voices arising. My head spun from the mead that I had drunk as the hours went by. Freya sat silent, close inside the circle of my arm, looking up ever and again at my face. I saw Odin brooding as he watched the people making merry on the brink of dreadful war. Pride in these Aesir, gratitude that they allowed me to be one of them, filled me.

The first light of dawn began slanting through the windows. Bragi stepped forward with his harp, and all voices died as the gentle-faced *skald* touched the quivering strings. His clear voice rang martial-loud through Valhalla:

Now comes the great hour
When Norn-spinners gather
The fate-threads of warriors
Of Aesir and Jotun.
Now Wyrd's dark daughters
Make ready the battle,
The struggle long fated
'Twixt darkness and light.

Bragi sang on, firing the blood with the stirring strains. And when he had finished, a tremendous shout of applause roared from us all. As the echoes of our shouts died, there came on their heels from far away the low, long reverberations of a horn-blast.

LOUDER and louder it grew as we listened in tense silence, waxing until the deep, tremendous note of that mighty trumpet throbbed through every corner of Asgard. Then it fell and died away.

"The great blast of Giallar horn," Odin said with quiet sternness. "Heimdall warns that the hosts of Loki approach."

We sprang to our feet. Odin's voice rang in quick command.

"We go forth to meet them. On the field Vigrid, on the other side of Bifrost Bridge, we will await them. Gather your men and horses. Aegir, you and Niord command our fleet! Put out with all our ships and lie off Asgard, until you see along which coast the Jotun fleet comes."

With a yell, the Aesir nobles and captains poured out of Valhalla. Trumpets blared out in the dawn, and there was the thunder of galloping horses, the clanking tramp of marching men hurrying up, the roar of orders shouted loudly. I remained in the almost empty hall with Freya, Odin and his family. The Aesir king was putting over his mail *brynya* a silver emblem carved with runes.

Vidar, the tall second son, brought Odin's great sword, and the king buckled it on. Thor, his little eyes blazing with battle-light, was swinging great Miolnir in the air, giving a last test to the strength of its helve.

Odin looked into the beautiful face of the lady Frigga.

"Farewell, my wife," he said in his deep voice. "We come back victors or dead men, as Wyrd wills it."

I had taken Freya into my arms. Almost fiercely I held her bright head between my hands and kissed her. Bright sunbeams from a window lit her hair to dazzling gold as I released her. Her blue eyes looked up into mine without a shadow of fear in their proud depths.

"Jarl Keith, I must remain with the women instead of riding by your side as I would wish. But my heart goes with

you. I am proud that you from the outlands fight today beside my people."

"Your people are mine, Freya," I answered. "It was I who brought the key that loosed Loki. I can only atone for that by fighting against the devil today."

Odin was striding toward the exit of the great hall. I tore myself from Freya and followed with giant Thor, Vidar and Vali. We emerged from Valhalla castle into the bright day. Before us were massed the warriors of Asgard, helmets and mail gleaming in the sun. Three thousand horsemen and five thousand footmen they numbered, their jarls and captains sitting their horses at the head of the men.

A great shout greeted Odin as we emerged. *Thralls* held our horses as we swung into the saddles. Thor vaulted heavily onto his great black stallion. Odin raised his hand high and shouted ringingly:

"To Vigrid!"

We spurred forward, the king, his sons and I galloping at the head of the massed horsemen. Across the city Asgard we rode, toward the castled gates of Bifrost. They swung open as we approached, and Heimdall, warden of the gates, was waiting for us on his own steed.

The guards on the tower above again sounded the great, throbbing blast of Giallar horn as we rode through the gates and onto the bridge. With Odin leading us, our horsemen streaming out in narrow file with armor shining gold in the dazzling sun, we galloped up the arch of the rainbow bridge. Like thunder clattered our horses' hoofs on that flying arc of stone.

FAR below us raged the green sea between Asgard and Midgard. Far back to our right, from the eastern cliffs of Asgard, the Aesir ships were putting out to sea under Aegir's command. Forty big dragons of war, square sails raised to the wind, brazen beaks dipping into the heaving waves, they

quickly moved out to await the coming of the Jotun fleet.

Wild exultation was throbbing in me like wine as we rode down the descending arch of Bifrost Bridge. I had forgotten that I was Keith Masters of the outside world. I had forgotten everything except that I was one of the Aesir, that I was to fight beside them for Freya and for Asgard against the savage hosts of evil Loki.

We halted on the open, rocky plain that lay at the northern extremity of Midgard. Behind us arched the rainbow bridge leading to Asgard. In front of us, beyond the flat field Vigrid, extended the dark, forested hills of Midgard. Odin had halted us beyond the hillock upon which his spherical copper generator stood, and near which my plane was parked.

"The footmen will mass in our center under Vidar," Odin ordered. "Half our horsemen on the left wing under Thor, and half on the right under Heimdall."

By now the infantry was streaming across Bifrost Bridge in dense, long files, archers, and spearmen and swordsmen. Thor bellowed the orders that drew them and the horsemen up in front of the little hillock. Odin had dismounted and climbed the hillock to his generator, and I followed him. Finally Thor, having completed the disposition of our forces, rode up the hillock to where the Aesir king and I were examining the generator.

"They come!" boomed Thor, pointing southward with his gleaming hammer.

We peered intently through the bright daylight. From the south, the glitter of a forest of helmets and spear-points flashed in the sun as a dense mass of Jotun soldiery advanced along the cliff-edge, screened by horsemen. Far out on the sea to the right, a great fleet of dragon-ships was sailing northward. There were at least a hundred of the black Jotun long-ships, and the Aesir vessels were advancing to meet them. In the south, a growing darkness was clouding the heavens. A strange dusk

was creeping up rapidly across the brilliant sky.

"Loki's storm-cones!" I shouted. "See where he has set them up on that crest, Lord Odin!"

I pointed. Southward, well behind the advancing Jotun army, rose a crest. Upon it was a small group of clustered objects that gleamed in the last rays of the half-obscured sun.

"Aye, I see," Odin said in his deep voice. "Loki prepares to loose his lightnings upon us, as we feared."

The Aesir king began to manipulate the enigmatic controls of his spherical generator, to throw up a defensive screen. The wind was moaning around us with increasing force as the darkness spread rapidly across the sky. The gloom seemed to boil up visibly from the distant crest where Loki had his storm-cones, and from which he was spraying a terrific electric field to unlock the tempests.

Down in the sea beyond the cliffs, the dark waves were churning ever higher. They and the shrieking winds were wildly tossing the Jotun and Aesir ships that maneuvered swiftly for battle.

Crash!

Out of the night-black sky, a blazing flash of white lightning had struck amid our massed footmen. It left a heap of scorched dead. On its heels came another blinding bolt that blasted three horsemen.

"Lord Odin, Loki's lightnings begin to slay my men!" roared Heimdall from the right wing. "Let us charge them before all are slain!"

"Wait!" called Odin, undismayed, his hands busy at the generator controls.

At the same time, the spherical copper generator began to throb with power. The radioactive matter in it, which Thor and I had procured from deep Muspelheim, was breaking down into pure power. The energy was being transformed into a radiant shell of power that was broadcast from the smaller copper ball atop the generator.

UP INTO the storm-nighted sky Odin's mechanism flung a great halo of glowing light. The halo that tented our forces stopped the blazing lightning-bolts that had begun to decimate us! Those blinding flashes hit the halo and splashed harmlessly upon it....

"It shields us from Loki's storm-cones!" I cried jubilantly. "We've neutralized his best weapon!"

"Wait, Jarl Keith, before you exult," warned Odin. "There is not enough radioactive fuel to operate this mechanism much longer. When it stops, Loki's lightning will play yet greater havoc with us."

"Can't we charge with all our horsemen and destroy Loki and his devilish weapons?" Thor cried fiercely.

"As soon as we leave the defense of this generator's screen of energy, Loki's lightnings will cleave us," Odin replied.

I realized the desperate nature of the emergency. If the Aesir and the Jotuns were to fight this battle on anything like even terms, Loki's storm-cones must be destroyed! Even if they were, the Aesir would be facing overwhelming numbers. But there would be a chance for victory, at least, whereas there would be no chance at all if Loki's forces were not checked.

In this emergency, my eyes fell on my plane parked some distance to the rear of our forces. Suddenly I remembered the bombs I had made the night before, for possible use in the battle.

"Lord Odin, I think that I may be able to destroy Loki's weapons!" I cried eagerly. "In my flying craft I have a weapon of the kind my people use in war. Let me try it."

"Can any flying ship live in this tempest?" the Aesir king asked incredulously.

I wondered, too. The storm that raged over this strange battlefield had now become chaotic in its insensate fury. From all the black sky over us, bolts of lightning induced by Loki's storm-cones were sizzling and flashing down.

Though they were splattering on

Odin's defense screen, the mounts of our horsemen were rearing wildly. Our warriors were white-faced in the light of the flashes. In the south, the mighty Jotun army was forming up to advance against us.

"I can make it!" I persisted without conviction. "I'll circle back around the worst of this storm."

"Then go, Jarl Keith, and the Norns guide you," Odin said reverently.

XVIII

I RACED back toward the plane. In a moment I had the rocket motor roaring, and then I managed a perilous take-off from the field. Raging winds, blowing now in this direction and now in that, threatened to hurl my rising plane back to the field. Sheets and flares of blinding lightning dazzled my eyes. But I rose and zoomed out over the sea, to circle back and approach Loki's position from the rear.

I hurtled through the unnatural darkness over the water. Lightning flares gave me a momentary glimpse of Aesir and Jotun ships locked in death-combat down on the wild waters. I rocketed over them. Then I swung back toward the cliffs of Midgard and came roaring down from behind upon the crest where Loki had his storm-cones.

I had the cabin window open, and my crude bombs near at hand. As I dived steeply, I peered down at the crest. Loki stood by the vicious storm-cones. The big mechanisms were clustered close together, their quartz nozzles pointed toward the distant Aesir forces. A fine violet electrical brush played over them as they sprayed their controlled static field.

I saw Loki's startled white face and the alarmed features of Utgar, Hel and the Jotun captains as my plane swooped down. Diving within a few yards of the storm-cones, I dropped four small bombs. There was a crimson flare in the lightning-seared blackness behind me. I looked back to see the storm-

cones, all but one, lying shattered and dismounted. I glimpsed Loki and Utgar. Unharmed, the Aesir arch-traitor was shouting orders as the Jotuns ran to their horses.

"Score one for my science," I muttered between my teeth, as I hurled the plane back toward the Aesir positions.

The single remaining storm-cone was still operating, and lightning was flaring and thunder rolled. But the terrific hail of bolts that had threatened to destroy the Aesir had stopped.

"Well done, Jarl Keith!" roared Thor, when I had landed my plane and run back to the hillock where Odin and his captains stood.

"It was well done," Odin declared. "For my generator is faltering now. Had you not destroyed the storm-cones, we would have been helpless."

"Loki's preparing to advance with all the Jotun forces," I said breathlessly. "See, there they come now!"

The Jotuns were deploying on the farther side of Vigrid field. At least ten thousand unmounted warriors formed up behind their wide screen of cavalry.

"There rides the arch-traitor!" cried Heimdall wrathfully.

I saw Loki. He rode behind the cavalry, at the head of the massed Jotun footmen. His bright golden helmet gleamed in the lightning flashes, his white steed curveting. Beside Loki's horse ran a great gray shape—the huge wolf, Fenris, coming like a war-dog with its master into battle.

"If only Iormungandr were with him, too!" rasped Thor. "The Midgard snake must die this day, to fulfill my oath."

The archers of the Jotuns, advancing behind their screen of horsemen, were discharging their missiles. Arrows rattled down from their mounts and horses squealed with pain.

"Take your places, but do not charge till I give the word," Odin ordered.

"Are we to be riddled without striking back a blow?" cried Thor furiously.

"Wait till I give the signal," Odin bade sternly. "Both our wings of horse-

men shall ride at the center and split through their main body. Vidar will follow with our footmen. Then, if Wyrd wills it, we shall cut their split forces to bits."

ODIN rode forward, and I followed with Vali, Bragi, Forseti and the other of the Aesir captains. Taking up our position between Thor's horsemen on the left and Heimdall's on the right, we waited. I felt the awful suspense of the moment. The arrows rattled down among us during the slow advance of the great Jotun host. The thunder and lightning of the storm still grumbled across the dark sky. In the face of them all, the horsemen and footmen of the Aesir waited silently and motionlessly behind Odin.

The Jotuns were well within bowshot, and their arrows were taking even greater toll. So close were they that back among them I could make out the white face of Loki, urging them forward. I could see big Utgar, the Jotun king, riding beside the arch-traitor. An ancient feud was rushing toward its climax in these last moments. I felt the tension of men who were somehow more than men. When this battle joined, it would be the clash of cosmic forces. . . .

"Now!" cried Odin, raising his mailed fist and flashing his sword high.

The trumpets of the Aesir blared wildly in answer. With a yell of pent-up tenseness, we spurred our horses and galloped forward. Our two mounted wings converged, charging right at the center of the great Jotun army. Riding forward with the others, I was scarcely conscious of individual action. Instinctively I spurred and drew my sword and leaned forward over my saddle-bow.

Before me, Odin's mighty figure galloped with great sword still raised high. Beside me, Thor was already whirling his gigantic hammer, bellowing his terrifying battle cry. Beyond him were Heimdall, Forseti and Bragi. And behind us thundered the three thousand Aesir horsemen, followed by the foot-

men under Vidar, Vali and Tyr.

Arrows showered among us. Men and horses tumbled, crashing in our midst as we galloped in that wild charge. Thunder roared deafeningly from the blackened sky ahead to drown our yelling trumpets. Lightning flashed blindingly across the sky. . . .

We struck the screen of the Jotun horsemen like a thunderbolt, tore through paper. Then our charge carried us smashing deep into the main body of the Jotun army. All Earth must have felt the splintering shock of that collision! My horse stumbled over Jotun bodies. I leaned from the saddle and struck furiously with my sword at black-bearded warriors who sought to reach me with ax and blade. I hewed down two enemies before their spears could touch my side.

All around me, swords were banging on helmets, men yelling in fierce blood-lust or shrill death agony, hamstrung horses squealing horribly, shields crashing together with deafening clangor. The trumpets of the Aesir were blaring unceasingly. The hoarse horns of the Jotuns roared a savage answer.

Thor, close beside me in the battle, was forcing his stallion forward. His huge hammer kept falling like a thing endowed with its own life upon the helmets of the Jotuns. Mjolnir's steel was red with blood and gray with brains as the bearded, red-faced giant whirled it. Thrice, in as many moments, he beat down Jotuns who would have slain me. And on my other side, Heimdall was wielding an ax like a woodsman, and Vidar was riding forward through the corpses he had made.

Right in front of us, Odin's eagle helmet gleamed through the chaos of battle. The great sword rose and fell as the Aesir king forced deeper into the Jotun host.

"For Asgard!" rang his deep voice.

And from the Aesir horsemen and footmen behind us shouted an answering chorus.

"Follow the king!"

The Jotun host began to split and give way before our concentrated assault. Though they greatly outnumbered us, we were driving a wedge between them.

"They waver!" shouted Vidar, wildly exultant. "Push hard and the battle is ours. They are breaking!"

As we forced forward, the Jotun footmen were giving ever more rapidly. If we could split them in two, cut them up and destroy them—

"Loki comes!" screamed Heimdall.

I saw his golden helmet shining through the murk of lightning-seared storm. Loki was pushing fearlessly through the Jotun host toward us. His face was white and beautiful with the exhilaration of battle as he came through the fight toward us. Beside him rode Utgar, and between them ran the great gray shape of Fenris.

"Stand firm, Jotuns!" Utgar was yelling to his wavering host. "The lord Loki is with us!"

WITH a fierce war cry, Odin spurred forward to meet Loki. Thor, Vidar, Heimdall, Bragi and I were all close behind the Aesir king. Heimdall and Bragi, forcing farther ahead, met the charge of Loki and Utgar first. I saw Loki's sword flash, and Heimdall tumbled from his horse, stabbed through.

Utgar's ax had crashed down upon Bragi's helm at the same moment. From Thor came an awful yell of wrath as he saw our two comrades fall.

"Come to meet me, traitor!" he bellowed to Loki.

But Odin reached the arch-demon instead. Beneath the flare of lightning, they struck at each other with swords that flashed like streaks of light. Fearless, blazing and beautiful shone Loki's face as he fought. His silver voice pealed in exultation.

"At last, Odin, I repay you for my long imprisonment!"

But Odin, at that moment, struck forth fiercely with all his strength in a great blow at Loki's helm. Loki swerved,

but the sword grazed his helmet. The stunning force of the blow sent him heeling back in his saddle.

"Death for Loki!" yelled the Aesir behind us in wild triumph.

A snarling, terrible roar, a scream of warning from my lips, both broke at the same moment. The giant wolf Fenris, as Loki was sent back by that terrible blow, leaped up like a gray thunderbolt at Odin. His huge jaws closed upon Odin's throat. Holding fast, he dragged the Aesir king from the saddle.

"Odin falls!" raged the shout of joy from the Jotun host.

I had already leaped from my saddle. I struck a terrific blow at Fenris as the huge wolf tore at Odin's prostrate body. My sword slashed deep into the wolf's shoulder. He turned, his green eyes blazing hell-fires, and catapulted at me.

But with a hoarse shout, Vidar struck at the charging wolf with his ax. The blow severed Fenris's head from his shoulders in one tremendous stroke. Odin's throat was torn into red ribbons. His eyes were closed and he seemed barely living as Thor lifted him.

"Odin is slain!" pealed Loki's silver voice. "Now falls Asgard. On Jotuns!"

Loki had recovered from the stunning blow that had been Odin's last. He was urging the Jotuns forward, his eyes flaring with unhuman rage at the slaying of his wolf.

The Aesir charge had halted, our warriors dismayed by the fall of Odin. And now, as the Jotuns rushed forward on us, we were pushed back by their superior numbers.

Back toward the end of the field, the cliff-edge from which Bifrost Bridge sprang, we were forced. Though the Aesir fought like madmen, they were falling in ever-increasing numbers before the yelling hosts of Jotuns. Thor had taken Odin's body and was bearing it back with us as we retreated. From all sides except the rear, the Jotuns surged upon us. The slaughter here was terrific. I seemed to be fighting in an unreal dream.

There was no standing against the heavier Jotun mass. Our shattered forces streamed over the high arch of Bifrost Bridge, through the gates of Asgard. Vidar, Tyr, Forseti and I came last.

Now all our surviving forces were safe within the gates. Utgar and Loki were leading the Jotuns hastily up onto the bridge after us. But as the winches inside the guard-castle creaked hastily, the gates were slowly swinging shut. Loki yelled an order. As though obeying a prepared plan, a score of Jotuns flung heavy spears into the hinges of the closing gates. The spears jammed the hinges, and the gates stopped closing.

"Push shut the gates!" Vidar yelled to the men at the winches.

"We cannot, for they are jammed!" was the frantic answer.

Across the rainbow bridge, Loki was leading his men forward and crying to them triumphantly.

"Forward Jotuns! Over the bridge! The gates of Asgard are open to us!"

XIX

VIDAR yelled to the warriors behind us. "Clear the hinges, some of you! The rest of us will hold back the Jotuns!"

He sprang out onto Bifrost Bridge. Tyr, Forseti and I, with a score of Aesir warriors, leaped after him. The men behind us worked frantically to pull out the heavy spears that had jammed the hinges of Asgard's gates. We four stood abreast on the arched bridge, our warriors behind us, facing the Jotun masses as they rushed up behind Loki and Utgar.

The storm darkened the whole sky, and wild winds threatened to sweep us from the unrailed, narrow span on which we stood. Lightning flared continually across the sinister sky, and the thunder was rolling louder.

Tyr had torn off his *brynja* and thrown away his helmet. His great breast bare, streaked with blood, he held two swords in his hands. His cav-

ernous eyes glared with a terrible light as he stepped in front of us. He yelled in a howl like that of a wild beast to the advancing Jotuns.

"*Berserk* am I! Who comes against me?"

The Jotuns pushing up onto the narrow bridge hesitated at sight of him, for he was truly terrible in his *berserk* madness.

"I await you, Utgar!" Tyr howled, his body quivering. "Come, for these swords are athirst!"

Utgar answered with a roar of rage. He and Loki, dismounted now, came up the arch of the bridge against us at the head of the Jotun mass. Tyr did not wait for their coming. With a ferocious scream, our *berserk* companion sprang to meet them.

His two swords leaped like living things. Utgar's ax shore into his side—and Tyr laughed! Shouting with glee, he smote Utgar's head from his shoulders with a single awful stroke. Five Jotuns fell before him as he raged in *berserk* fury. Abruptly Loki's blade stabbed through his heart. Tyr swayed, staggered at the edge of the bridge. Then he crumpled and fell clear from the stone, plummeting down toward the raging, stormy sea far below.

Vidar, Forseti and I had been rushing forward with our men to support Tyr. Now we met the Jotuns, who were madened by the killing of Utgar, urged on by Loki's silver voice.

For whole minutes we held the bridge against them! How, I do not know. Before my eyes was only a blur of flashing steel and wolfish faces, into which I struck by instinct rather than by design. I felt the red-hot stabs of sword blades in my left shoulder and right thigh. I saw Forseti reel back, dying from one of Loki's incredibly swift, deadly thrusts. I glimpsed the archfiend's wrathful, beautiful face as he fought with Vidar.

We were pushed back over the arch of the bridge, toward the gates. A yell crashed up from the men behind us.

"The gates are freed!"

WE STAGGERED back through the small opening of the nearly closed gates. Instantly the gates were slammed shut in the faces of Loki and his hordes. For several moments we stood motionless, panting, wild-eyed, covered with blood. The Jotun hordes were banging vainly at the gates with sword and ax.

No more than a few hundred Aesir warriors remained as exhausted, wounded survivors of that dreadful battle. Out on Vigrid field, the dead lay in thousands. Ravens were swooping down on the pathetic corpses from the storm-black sky.

"Get to the towers and use your bows upon Loki's horde!" Vidar called hoarsely to part of our warriors.

They obeyed, and arrows began to rain down on the besiegers on the bridge. The howling of the Jotuns was loud even through the deepening thunder of the storm, as they sought to batter down the gates, yet avoid their own slaughter.

Vidar hastened with us through the guard-castle to the stone plaza beyond. There Odin lay upon the stones. Thor was kneeling beside his dying father. Odin's lips stirred, his wavering stare held a feeble, dying light as he looked up at his giant son.

"The Norns sever my thread," he whispered. "Doom falls upon me, as Wyrd ordains—upon Asgard, too, I fear. If Loki prevails, you must do that which I ordered you."

"I will, Father," rumbled Thor, his big hand clenching tight the helve of his mighty hammer. "But stay with us!"

Odin's life was already gone, though, spent by his last effort to speak.

"Bear him to Valhalla!" ordered Thor's great voice as he arose.

"Loki and some of the Jotuns move away," called a warrior from the guard-castle tower.

We hurried back and looked through the loopholes in the gates. Loki and half the Jotun forces were striding back

across the bridge and Vigrid field, marching southward. The rest of the Jotuns still battered at the gates, heedless of the arrows that fell upon them from above.

"Loki plans some trick," Thor muttered.

"Where are our ships?" Vidar cried. "Look!"

He pointed down at the sea east of Asgard. There the waves were running high and foam-white beneath the howling winds of the storm. I saw the Jotun fleet below, hacked and reduced to less than forty almost useless ships. But they were beating southward along the coast, parallel to Loki's marching force. Scarred and torn by battle though the Jotun ships were, of the Aesir vessels I saw nothing but floating wreckage.

"Skoal to Aegir and Niord!" shouted Thor. "Skoal to the sea-kings who have gone to Viking death beneath the waves!"

A clangor like the din of doom beat from the gates before us as the Jotun horde upon the bridge sought to batter them down. We worked at Thor's orders, hastily piling blocks of stone to hold the sagging gates. Then into our midst a wild-faced Aesir warrior came running. He shouted over the clangor and the terrifying roll of loud thunder.

"Loki's forces come upon us in their ships!" he yelled. "They seek to land in our harbor!"

Thor uttered a fierce cry as he stared down at the stormy sea. The Jotun fleet was moving along the coast, the ships jammed with men, heading for the unprotected fjord in the eastern cliffs of Asgard.

"They try to force entrance to Asgard from the harbor—and we have but few guards there!" roared Thor. "Vidar, hold these gates! Half of you come with me to hold the harbor!"

The bearded giant ran with mighty strides toward the eastern edge of Asgard island. Half of us followed him. The storm was now buffeting Asgard with full force. Lightning burned in

sheets and stabs across the night-black sky. Torchlight was flaring from the dark, mountainous masses of Valhalla, whence came through the tempest the dim wailing of women's voices as Odin's body was borne home.

OUT of the storm-seared dusk, a slim, mail-clad figure darted to my side as I hastened with Thor and our scant force of warriors toward the eastern cliff. It was Freya, wearing her mail and helmet, holding a shield and light bow in her hand.

"Jarl Keith!" she cried. "I feared you slain in that terrible battle! I leave you no more!"

"You can't stay with me!" I protested. "We go to hold the harbor against Loki's new assault!"

"Then I'll fight with you!" she said fiercely. "If doom comes now upon Asgard, I'll meet it at your side."

I could not turn her from her relentless purpose. She ran lightly beside me as we hastened after Thor down the first steps of the narrow cliffside stair. Lightning washed the cliffs, and the deafening crack of thunder drowned the shrieking winds and boom of the sea. By the flashing flares, we saw the Jotun ships already sweeping quickly into the narrow fjord below us. Behind them in the raging sea swam something long, black and sinuous, a great, incredible shape.

"Iormungandr comes with his master Loki!" boomed Thor. "It is well!"

Before we were down the stair, the Jotuns were landing below. Overwhelming the small force of Aesir guards there, they rushed up to meet us.

I swung Freya behind me.

"Keep at my back," I ordered.

"I am not afraid!" argued her clear voice in my ear.

Her bow twanged, and an arrow sped down into the throat of the foremost of the swarming Jotuns. I saw Loki leaping ashore from one of the ships. Then the nearest Jotuns reached us.

Thor's hammer smashed down, and

the first two Jotuns fell back with crushed skulls. They pitched off the stair to the depths below. Arrows from enemy archers farther down the stair whizzed up through the lightning-seared dusk and rattled off our mail, or struck down men among us. Freya's bow kept twanging. Each time she loosed an arrow, her clear cry sang loud in my ears.

I tried to keep her near me as I fought beside Thor and tall Vali, desperately trying to hold back the Jotuns. But the stair was wide enough only for three of us to fight abreast. Thor, crimson with blood from many wounds, swung his hammer like a demon of destruction. Yet we were forced up the stairs.

Vali dropped with an arrow in his eye, and an Aesir from behind rushed to take his place. . . .

XX

UPWARD we were pushed, to the top of the stair, the very edge of the cliff. There we hacked with sword and ax. The terrible weapon of the Hammerer whirled and screamed with such fury that the Jotuns could not force the narrow way.

Lightning flared again in a continuous blinding flame. It showed Loki's golden helmet flashing up amid the Jotuns crowded on the stair. And it showed, too, a slimy, black, scaly monster whose coils rippled up the steps as it advanced before its master.

"Iormungandr comes!" cried Freya. "The Midgard serpent!"

The Jotuns hugged the cliff side of the stair. Even they were appalled by their dread ally as the incredible snake writhed up toward us. Thor raised his hammer high. Like a shooting black thunderbolt, Iormungandr propelled himself at the bearded giant.

In the lightning streak, I saw the snake's giant spade-shaped head darting with the speed of light. Its opaline eyes were coldly blazing. Its opened jaws emitted a flood of fine, green poi-

son-spray that covered Thor's crimsoned figure.

"My oath to Frey!" roared Thor, and his hammer flashed down.

The snake, with more than human speed, swerved to avoid that terrific blow. But not so swift as Thor's stroke was its swerve. The steel head of Miolnir smashed down upon the spade-shaped head and ground it into the rock of the stair. The hammer itself shivered to fragments from that great stroke.

Iormungandr's monstrous body writhed in its death throes, flinging Jotuns from the stair to death. Then the serpent's great body fell over the edge, dropping to the sea far below.

The giant was staggering almost helplessly. The helve of his broken hammer suddenly fell from his hand. His red face grew pallid through the blood and green poison that coated it. I sprang with Freya to support him. The few score of Aesir warriors left were trying to hold back the Jotuns. Loki's sword was stabbing in deadly stroke among them.

"I am sped," gasped Thor. "The poison of Iormungandr enters my wounds. Help me to Valhalla, for Asgard is lost. There still remains that which Odin bade me do."

Freya and I stumbled with the reeling giant away from that hopeless battle. Our last Aesir warriors could not hope to hold back Loki and his ravening horde. The unending drum-roll of thunder was crashing over Asgard. By the sheeted lightning, we saw Aesir women running calmly to stand beside their men in death. We staggered with Thor into the torchlit entrance of Valhalla.

"To the chamber of—the pit-road—to deep Muspelheim—take me there," gasped Thor.

AS WE entered Valhalla castle, I heard a wild, wolflike shout of triumph behind us. I looked back. The last Aesir resistance had been overcome, and Loki and the Jotuns were pouring onto the lofty plateau of As-

gard. Some of the Jotuns already were running to open Asgard gates to those who battered them from Bifrost Bridge. Women who had rushed out to seek their dead mates were being cut down everywhere.

Freya snatched a torch from a socket as we entered the passages of Valhalla. We stumbled past the great hall where Frigga sat motionless beside Odin's bly. On we went, down into the dark passages to the chamber of the pit that led to fiery Muspelheim.

Swaying blindly, Thor pressed the runes on the door with a swiftly failing hand. The door swung open and we entered. Immediately the bearded giant crumpled standing against a wall. Fighting to retain consciousness, he pointed to the square silver box that held the remote control of the sea-gate in the roof of the fiery underworld.

"Give me that control box, Jarl Keith," he whispered in a weakening voice, "that I may open the gate far below and let the waters of the sea rush down into Muspelheim upon the atomic fires. It was my father Odin's order to me. Yes, the atomic fires will be smothered and their radiations will be ended. This will no longer be a place of eternal youth and warmth."

"But when the sea water strikes Muspelheim, there will be an explosion that will wreck this land," I protested.

"And that, too, would be well!" Thor shouted, swaying. "Let the land be wrecked before Loki and the Jotuns reap fruit of their victory and become a dread menace to all the rest of Earth. It was Odin's warning—Loki must not be allowed to menace all the world!"

He fell heavily to the floor. But he raised his great head and his voice came chokingly:

"Give me the box!"

I heard the quickly approaching roar of Jotun voices from Valhalla's halls above, and in my mind unfolded a shocking vision of Loki, using his overwhelming powers of evil science to dominate all the outside world. I sprang

toward the silver control box and was turning to hand it to the dying Thor, when Freya screamed.

A man burst into the chamber. Loki's angelic face was a hell-mask of rage. The sword glittered in his hand and his blue eyes were blazing.

"I knew the Aesir would seek thus with my own ancient handiwork to snatch triumph from me by destruction," he said. "But you are too late."

He sprang at me with tiger swiftness, his sword raised. I ripped out my own weapon, but Loki's blade was already stabbing through my shoulder like a white-hot iron. I reeled, senses failing from that agony, dropping the silver control box.

"You have lost, Aesir!" taunted Loki maliciously. "Asgard is mine, and the last Aesir falls to the swords of my Jotuns."

He did not see the great shape rising behind him. Thor, roused by sound of Loki's hated voice, had clutched the rock wall with his nerveless, bloodily tattered fingers and dragged himself erect. Loki was caught unprepared. The giant hands stole close—and clutched Loki's white neck!

"Turn the knob upon the control-box, Jarl Keith!" Thor roared.

Loki stabbed his dagger blindly and furiously back into Thor's breast, battling venomously to free himself. I lunged forward and snatched up the silver box. I seized the knob upon it and turned it as far as it would go.

From the pit-mouth at the center of the chamber came a dull, distant roar of rushing waters. Then a terrific shock rocked Asgard to its foundations. Blinding steam swirled up from the pit with a ravening sound.

"Fool!" shrieked Loki as he tore free from the dying Thor.

HE HURLED himself at me, seeking to snatch the control box from my grasp. I thrust him back with the last of my strength. Through the scalding steam that filled the chamber, Loki stag-

gered backward—and reeled straight into the pit!

A fading scream came up from the roaring cloud of steam as he plunged down into the abyss. . . .

All Valhalla castle was rocking wildly above us. One fearful Earth-shock followed another. Wild yells of panic chorused from above, coming thinly through the tumult of grinding mountains. Freya was flung against the stone floor, and I stooped frantically over her.

"It is well!" choked Thor. "Asgard and Midgard shall die with the Aesir!" As he sagged to the floor, he raised his dying face toward me. For a moment his voice rolled out as strongly as of old.

"Skoal to the Aesir! Skoal to the great race that is gone forever!"

Then his bearded face sagged to the floor in death.

I helped Freya to her feet and dragged her out of the scalding, steam-filled chamber. The Earth-shocks were becoming more violent with each moment. The crash of falling masonry was ominously loud.

"We can't stay here any longer!" I cried to her. "But if we can get to my plane, we can escape."

I stumbled with her up through the shaking, grinding halls of Valhalla castle. The Jotuns had fled or been buried. The scene outside the castle was appalling. Storm still blackened the sky. Lightning flared and thunder roared, but all noises were drowned by the terrible grinding crash of the Earth-shocks.

I hastened with Freya toward Bifrost Bridge. A terrible roar beneath us heralded the new shock that flung us off our feet. From cracks splitting in the solid rock of Asgard, wild clouds of steam rushed up. There was a prolonged roar of falling stone. Freya cried out. I looked back just in time to see great Valhalla collapsing into flaming, tumbling ruin.

By this time we had reached Bifrost Bridge and were stumbling precariously

across that corpse-littered, dizzy, trembling span. Abruptly the rainbow bridge rocked beneath us, threatening to throw us into the crazily boiling sea far below. Some Jotuns were escaping ahead of us, paying no attention to us in their mad panic.

My plane suddenly loomed out of the stormy dusk. I pulled Freya into the cabin. The rocket motor roared into life, and the plane rushed along the quaking field and lurched into the air. Upward we climbed, the ship bucking and rocking in the terrific currents.

As we climbed higher and headed northward, I saw the full extent of the disaster that had smitten the hidden land. Midgard and Asgard, rocking wildly and shaking the rainbow bridge between them into fragments, were sinking into the sea, shrouded with steam. The titanic explosion caused by the inrush of sea upon the raging atomic fires of Muspelheim was forcing the whole land to collapse upon that burning underworld. Before our eyes, as I fought to keep the plane aloft, the land solemnly sank. The blind-spot refraction around the whole land instantly vanished. The rhyme of the rune key had been fulfilled.

Ragnarok had come—the twilight and doom of the Aesir, destroying them and their amazing, wonderful civilization—and also their destroyer....

EPILOGUE

IF MY great adventure, little remains to tell. Our flight back across the frozen ocean to the expedition's schooner was without mishap. I shall never forget the amazement of Doctor Carrul and the rest of the expedition's members, when I landed my rocket plane beside the *Peter Saul*. Feverishly they asked excited questions when they saw Freya and the bloodstained, battered helmets and mail we wore.

I told them the truth, though I suppose I should have known they could not believe my story. But for their dis-

belief, I cared little. Nor did I care about what happened after our return to New York. The expedition included in its report a statement that Keith Masters, physicist and pilot, had returned in a delirious condition. They said I had been caught in an Arctic storm and had brought with me a girl who was obviously a survivor from some storm-wrecked Norwegian ship.

I know now that the smug skepticism of modern men cannot easily be shaken. Nor can I entirely blame them. For there are times when even to me all that I experienced takes on the semblance of a dream. It certainly seems like a dream that I rode over Bifrost Bridge with Odin and the warriors of Asgard. Did I really sit in Valhalla's high hall and feast with the nobles and captains of the Aesir? How can I be sure I fought side by side with Thor against Loki and his hordes, on that last great day?

But to reassure myself that it was no dream, I have only to turn and smile gratefully at Freya, my wife. She is dressed now in modern garb, but with the same bright golden hair, sea-blue eyes and slender grace as when I met her first on the cliffs of Midgard. For Freya is always beside me, and not one day have we ever been separated, nor will we ever be.

We do not speak often of lost Asgard and its people, though they are often in my mind as I know they are in hers. But on one night in each year, the night of that doomsday eve when we feasted in Valhalla before the coming of the enemy, I pour wine into two glasses and we drink a toast. And our toast is in the words that Thor spoke from dying lips.

"Skoal to the Aesir, to the great race that is gone forever!" I say as I raise my glass.

And from across the table comes Freya's sweet, sorrow-filled voice, whispering her reply.

"Skoal!"

And we drink in memory of the greatest people Earth has ever known.





She pushed open the door . . .
"Wow bwidge," she said, and went in

The Disinheritors

By RICHARD MATHESON

You can drive people out of
their minds—but how
do you drive them
out of their bodies?

LET ME tell you about one of the last persons who went on a picnic with her husband, George Grady.

This person's name was Alice and she had blonde hair and a mind of her own. She was twenty-eight by the calendar and her husband was thirty-two. They liked to daydream sometimes as most

people do. That's not why they went on a picnic but it bears mentioning.

George worked for the city. This meant working six days and having one free. The week they went on the picnic, the day was Wednesday.

So on this Wednesday morning, Alice and George got up very early; even before their electric rooster had clarified the dawn. They whispered while they dressed and completed their toilets, and then went downstairs to the kitchen.

They had breakfast and made sandwiches and sliced pickles and George took out hard-boiled egg yolks, mixed them with pepper and other condiments and shoved the result back into the eggs again and called them works of art.

Then, when they had all the sandwiches neatly folded into waxed paper and the thermos bottle gurgling full with coffee, they tumbled out of their little homestead.

Their automobile stood waiting in the early morning air. Into its damp oily interior they piled and went chugging off to the country, up hills and down dales and so on. They drove until there were no more billboards, which is a long drive from any city.

When they reached the point where nature had a thin breathing ground before dying into the next suburb, George turned off the superhighway and drove down an old lane encrusted with high grass and bushes and foliage-dripping trees.

At length he turned the nose of their faithful runabout into a rich forest glade. He shut off the motor and they got out and spread a blanket on the ground where they could look over a mirror-sheened lake.

Then they sat down and admired God's handiwork and made appropriate remarks. Alice pulled up her thin knees and put her equally thin arms around them. George took off his hat and arranged the few remaining strands of his hair. As usual he regaled Alice with tales about the boys at work and what cards they were. Alice didn't care.

Neither did George, for that matter.

After a while they ate the food in the mesh basket and smacked their respective lips and said there's nothing like eating in the country. And George ate five sandwiches and belched to the north.

Then, when filled up to the chin line, he groaned an immense groan, loosened his belt and rolled on his back. He yawned and, through his gaping gold-toothed mouth, announced his intentions of sleeping the ensuing two years.

A LICE said, let's take a walk and admire the scenery. She said we need it to digest all that food we ate. She said it's a crime to waste all this beauty, this is such a gorgeous, gorgeous spot. She said George are you asleep and he said yes.

She got up clucking accusingly.

She left him snoring and walked out of the glade and down a wood-rimmed path.

It was a warm day. Sunlight patted the earth with warm hands. Overhead the breeze whispered in the leaves and the rustle of the woodlands was a song. Birds chirped and twittered and gave forth, and Alice was consumed with a passion for Nature. She skipped. And she sang.

She reached a hill and walked up with a mountaineer's crouch. At the summit she pushed lean fists into her hips and looked down possessively at the dark forest floor ahead.

Down there it looked like a murky auditorium with all the trees like patient customers waiting for the show to start. Hardly any light penetrated the thick canopy of their leafy coiffures.

Alice clapped her hands in wordless delight and went down a path which seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, and had. Leaves mumbled crackling incantations beneath her descending feet.

At the foot of the path, she found a little bridge arching its moldy back over a brook that gurgled and bubbled over smooth stones.

Alice stood on the bridge and peered

into the crystal torrent. She saw herself as in a melting glass. Her reflection ran, burst, and jumped together again. It made her giggle.

I am lost in the woods, she said to herself. I am lil Goldilocks and I am lost in the nassy ole woods.

She tittered, wrinkling her thin-cheeked face.

Then she wondered what on earth had made her think of Goldilocks after all those years. She put her eyebrows together. They huddled in a conference. Brain cells tried harder.

She let it go.

That was a mistake.

I am Goldilocks, she insisted in song as she turned from the rail and skipped off the squeaking bridge.

Alice stopped short and gaped.

My God, she said.

There was a little house in the deepest shadow of the glade, sitting at the feet of the forest. That's odd, Alice said to no one. I didn't see that house before. Did the shadows hide it then? I didn't see it at all from the top of the hill.

And, of course, she hadn't.

ALICE crunched over the leafy woods rug toward the little house.

Half of her tugged back, sensing a strangeness. Here she had just finished saying she was Goldilocks. And the next second *there* was a little house and if it wasn't the house of the three bears then what was it?

She advanced with timid half-cowed steps. Then she stopped.

It was a cute house. Just like a fairytale house with carved eaves and sills and frames. Alice got a kick out of it. She skipped up to the house feeling young.

She decided to talk in infantile gibberish as she peered through a dusty pane.

Ooh me ooh my, she cooed, isn't this a pwitty little housey wousey.

She couldn't see the inside very clearly. The windows were blurry. I shall go to the door; the thought arranged itself from the mass of incohesion in her brain.

She believed it to be her own thought and went to the door.

She touched it. She pushed it open. Wow bwidge, she said, and peered in.

It was just like the room in the illustration from her Goldilocks book which she hadn't looked in for twenty years.

Twenty? The ghastly realization weakened her delight. She pouted over the brutality of time.

Then she said, I won't even think about that. I'll be gay.

So, little Goldilocks went into the little house and there in the middle of the room were three chairs.

Well I'll be goddamned, said Alice, not preserving the spirit of the moment very well.

She looked at the chairs incredulously.

There was the big one. There was the mama size one. There was the baby one.

Ulp, said Alice.

She looked around. Everything fitted. She was astounded. No kidding. This was it. Insane. But as true as she was standing there.

Alice went over to the big chair. She wondered what this all added up to. Of course, she couldn't guess.

Her lips toyed with the idea of smiling as she perched herself gingerly on the edge of the papa chair. A tentative giggle erased gravity from her plain features. She felt young again. I'm lil Goldilocks and I'll kill the first lovechild that says I ain't.

She looked around with lips fumbling to repress a smile of wicked delight. I don't like this chair, she thought. I don't like it because I'm Goldilocks and I'm not supposed to like it.

She sat up bolt upright.

I really am Goldilocks, she thought. I'm living it out fair and square.

This was a giddy thought for Mrs. Alice Grady, wed a decade, childless, with greying strands of hair and a dreamworld that life had stepped on.

I don't like this chair, she declared.

And, oddly enough, she didn't like it. So she stood up. The momentary thought struck her that George would have got

a charge out of this little place. Well, it was his own fault, sleeping away his life. She couldn't be blamed for thinking that.

Alice grew up for a moment in wondering who owned this charming little house. Was it an exhibit for some fur coat company, some chair manufacturer? Eh? she said, but the walls answered not.

SHE went to the window and peered out.

She couldn't see very well. But she did notice that it was getting darker.

However, there were still poles of sunlight leaning against the tree-tops and poking into the earth. Alice stared at the golden ribbons angling through the gloom. She sighed. It was a fairy tale, no fooling. It was unreality becoming real.

This frightened her.

Because people don't care for unreality becoming real. It pricks their well-fed minds you see, with something like a hunger pang. They prefer the logical stuffiness of expectancy. It is only at certain times that they weaken, letting imagination in.

That's the time to get them.

So, frightened by shapeless apprehension, Alice clacked heels to the door. It opened without trouble. And that made the difference.

She said, oh what the hell, why be a worry wart. Once a month maybe, with luck, George takes me out and this is the day for this month so I'm not going to waste it.

She turned and went back into the room with an air of satisfied bravado.

She tried the second chair just for the sake of plot. Uh-uh, she said in piping girlish tones. She stood up with churling disdain on her face.

Sidestepping, she plopped herself down on the smallest chair. Ah, ha, she declared assertively, this chair is the schmaltz. I will sit here and think.

She thought.

Now this is odd. Where did this house

come from? Does it belong to some eccentric millionaire? No, not in a government park. Then what did it mean? Who lived there? Tell me three bears do, she said to herself, and I'll give you a shot in the teeth.

But if it wasn't three bears who was it? She scratched her head. Or were it? Or . . .

Giving it up, Alice jumped up and ran into the next room.

Well I'll be double damned, she proclaimed in astonishment.

There was a table.

Just like the table in her childhood book, *The Three Bears*. A low, rough-hewn table, stained and aged.

And right on this table were three steaming bowls of porridge.

Alice's jaw sagged. This was a kick in the pants and no joke. What was there to make of it?

She stared at the table and the bowls, and a shiver ran down her twenty-eight-plus-year-old spine. She glanced fearfully over her shoulder. Don't know as I care to run into three bears, she said in awed tones.

Her brow pushed together into fleshy rills and ridges. This is too much, she thought. To think of living a fairy tale is one thing. To live it is another thing. This is just a little bit bone-chilling. I know there's a logical explanation for all this, but . . .

This is their highest and their lowest moment. They always know there's a logical explanation. But their boundaries of logic are always too narrow to include the explanation that does exist.

So Alice sought for solidity.

I just left George, she said. He was snoring on the ground full of logical deviled eggs and natural pickles and tangible coffee. And we are married according to solid tradition and we live at a substantial 184 Sumpter Street. George makes a corporeal \$52.80 per week and we play bridge with the flesh and blood Nelsons.

She was still frightened.

Locating a lump in her throat, she

swallowed it. She said, I think I'll be going now.

BUT she didn't move. She said, come on feet; move. But the feet remained idle. She was losing control. Now I am scared she said, scared motionless. Or maybe I'm not as frightened as I think I am. After all, she told herself, this is only a weird coincidence. This is probably the house of three nutty old people who, when they see someone coming, put three different size bowls of porridge on the table and hide in a closet.

Hello! called Goldilocks, is anyone t'home?

Not a soul answered and the wind chuckled evilly down the chimney.

Hello? called Alice, wishing that a crotchety old man would rush in and say—ho! what are you doing in this government museum, you interloper, it's past closing time; out you go!

No answer. No sound. Just a dead quiet house and three porridge bowls breathing aromatic steam into the air.

Alice sniffed.

Mighty good, she had to admit. But she said, I'll be switched if I eat any because, well for one reason, I just ate a whole pile of food and I'm not at all . . . *Good God!*

Alice was starving.

Or she believed she was. Same thing. It was getting to her.

Alice got scared for real and crossed her arms which had gone goose-fleshed. She backed away into the next room. She bumped into the papa chair and cried out—oh!

She stood shivering for a moment.

Then she calmed down. After all, she reasoned, was anyone hooting at her. Had she seen any ghostly faces? Had any invisible fingers clawed at her? No!

And that's the way they figure, of course. If they don't see things that fit into the pattern of what they think of as frightening and evil, they don't worry about anything. A strength. And a weakness.

So Alice was calm again. Were there three bears within twenty miles? In the zoo. Behind thick bars. What was the worry?

It was a little house that belonged to someone. That was all. A papa and a mama and a baby. Or three old ladies of diminishing stature. Or three retired end men. They lived there and, at the moment, they were out chopping wood or getting water or gathering nuts in May.

It was all right. Quite all right. Soon she would leave and run back up the hill to George and tell him what he'd missed. And next Thursday at bridge with the flesh and blood Nelsons would she have an anecdote or would she have an anecdote?

Alice went back into the other room again. She muttered to her little self, I'll be a cross-eyed, knock-kneed, pigeon-toed, lop-eared I don't know what. Here I must have at least a gross of basket lunch. And now I'm hungry. Must have been the walk.

She sat at the table in the little chair. It occurred to her that if she fitted the little chair, the person who sat in the big chair must be about seven foot tall.

Now, do I dare, she thought. Does I have the temerity to eat some of this porridge?

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. Could it be that the porridge was poisoned, drugged, an oatmeal mickey?

She sniffed.

Why should it be? her mind inquired. Who in the hell is going to leave poisoned porridge in a government park? That would constitute a felony and a misdemeanor and be damn nasty in the bargain.

She showed her teeth in a smile.

After all, she argued, it isn't every day that a gal gets a chance to play Goldilocks. Let's take advantage.

SHE took another giant whiff of the porridge in the big bowl. Mmmmm, she said, this smells scrumptious. She reached for the big spoon.

No, that wasn't cricket.

She reached in her dress pocket and plucked out a wooden spoon which had been a spear for the gherkins. She sniffed it. Not too pickley. Not by any means.

She took a little porridge from the edge of the big bowl, feeling like a perfect criminal when the cereal all mashed together again, forming a smooth unbroken surface.

She inhaled the warm mealy odor, her nose wrinkling with pleasure.

Oh this is so good and warm and I'll just taste a little now and . . . *Yow!*

It was burning hot. The spoon jerked in her fingers and the porridge splattered on the floor. She looked around in frightened guilt, sucking in mouthfuls of air. Her mouth cooled, her scorched tongue became a cooling lump of numb flesh.

Damn, she muttered, why didn't I forget the plot and try the little bowl first crack out of the bag? No use running this thing into the ground. Alice still felt chipper. It is the one admirable quality these people have; a sense of humor which bubbles up to the very moment of destruction.

So Alice Grady alias Goldilocks tasted some porridge from the smallest bowl.

Ah, she said, this is just right. Haven't had anything so good since I was a kid.

And she ate it all up without a qualm.

Not only without a qualm but with a sort of perverse pleasure, wondering who was going to cry at the sight of the empty bowl.

However, when she had finished, Alice looked up from the bowl and felt guilt break out into drops on her forehead.

Now I've done it, she thought. Where do I get such nerve? This is a stranger's home. I'm no better than a housebreaker. I could be sent to jail for this. This eating I just did constitutes a burglary. I better get out and quick too before the people come back.

She got up, and with a sense of penitence, picked up the cereal from the

floor and threw it and the spoon into the cold fireplace.

She looked around and shook her head. No use trying to think otherwise. There was something definitely phony here.

Well I'm going now, she said loudly as though someone were arguing the point with her. I'm going back to George and tell him all about this.

First you must see if there are really three beds upstairs, said a voice in her mind that didn't sound familiar.

She frowned. Oh no, she said, I'm leaving right off.

Oh no, said the voice insolently, you've got to see if there are three beds upstairs. You're Goldilocks, remember?

Alice looked worried. She chewed her lip. But she went to the staircase and started up. It seemed very much as if someone were piling stones in her stomach. She felt them getting heavier and heavier. They were cold stones.

She stopped abruptly and yawned.

I'm getting sleepy, she said.

That brought her up short, drove a bolt of icy dread through her. Someone with chilled hands was knocking on the door to her heart. I'm scared, she admitted at last. I want to go. I want to leave. This is spooky. It's wrong. I'm scared and I want to go.

How about getting up there and seeing if there are really three beds!

There was no use denying it. It wasn't her own mind speaking.

The porridge!

Clever girl. Too late. Too late.

She struggled to turn and go down the stairs. But she couldn't. She simply had to go to the bedroom. It wasn't a vague compulsion, it was an order. Alice Grady was losing touch. She was drifting away. With her remaining strength she tried to scream. Her throat closed up.

IT WAS getting darker still. The hallway was dim. And her brain was whirling and her limbs felt like running lead. God protect me, she tried to whisper but the words died in a trembling of her lips. George, the name came forth

in a crusty mumble. George save me!

Alice stumbled into the little bedroom, bleary-eyed, and the fear in her a jumble of words that weren't words. Tears ran down her numbed cheeks and her stomach hurt with a cutting pain. She cried out once.

Then, driven on, she went over to the big bed and fell on it.

No no! cracked the voice in her head, this is too hard.

And she struggled up like an unoiled robot and fell on the second bed. Her mind called out—no, this one is too soft and you don't like it one bit!

With eyes closed and a burning fever in her body Alice staggered to her feet and then pitched across the small bed with a choking shriek.

She felt the soft coverlet pressing against her cheek. And the voice droned off into swirling blackness—this is the right bed. This is the right bed at last.

And when she woke up, she knew what it was all about.

The house was gone and she was lying on the forest leaves.

She got up with a smile and walked slowly up the night-shrouded hill. She even laughed aloud at that fool, Alice Grady, who had let stupid imagination get the better of her.

I was waiting for her in the car. She smiled a little as she slid in beside me.

"So," she said, "How long have you been one?"

"Years now," I said, "Remember that time Alice and George went to the sea-

shore? About five years ago?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Well, George and I went down to Davey Jones's locker with a mermaid," I told her, "and he lost his mind and I came back using his body for my home."

She smiled and I started the car.

"What about the Nelsons?" she asked.

"They've been with us for a long time," I said.

"How many real people are left on earth now?" she asked.

"About fifty or so," I said.

"It's really very clever," she said, "Alice Grady never suspected it for a second."

"Of course not," I said, "That's the charm of it."

And it is charming how we are inheriting the earth. Without a shot. With no one ever knowing.

One by one we've taken your bodies and made them our own. We've let your minds destroy themselves by letting your childishness extend itself beyond intelligence; until it reaches that inevitable point where we can gain complete control.

And soon there will be only us and no more earth people. Oh, the outward picture will remain. But the plan will change.

And until our work is done, the remainder of genuine earth people will never know about it.

A little more than fifty left.

Watch out.

You're one of them. And you know.

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"They may be only ruins, but we must make sure"

HALAN ANTHOR adjusted the controls on the viewplate, bringing the tiny spot of light on the center of the screen to a sharper focus. The one fleck of dull red was all that swam into view; the rest of the plate remained a shining pool of blackness.

"It's the end of the line, Puss," Anthor said, his voice ringing hollowly in the small cabin. "The end of ten thousand years of expansion and exploration. The end of the galaxy."

He turned and glanced affectionately at the brindle-colored cat calmly licking

It all depends on your . . .

V I E W P O I N T

By FRANK M. ROBINSON

her paws at the other end of the cabin.

"How would you like to see the universe, Puss? To have your rear feet in the Milky Way and your front paws on the last outpost of space?"

He knelt down and snapped his fingers at her. She stretched, arched her back, and padded slowly over to him. He picked her up and placed her on the heavy plastic screen where she skidded on the smooth surface, then balanced herself cautiously, all four paws spread far apart. Anthor's hand touched a knob and a fine mist of stars drifted into the lower corner of the plate.

"There you are, Puss—straddling all of creation!"

His own words caught him up and he fell silent for a moment, staring raptly at the panorama on the plate. Ten thousand years of expansion and conquest and now Man was supreme from one end of the galaxy to the other—except for the tiny dull red sun at this farthest reach. The last star to be explored.

MAN had come a long way, he thought, since the first curious ape had left the safety of the trees for the danger of the ground. A million years of history, of fighting the wilderness and fighting each other, and finally fighting the thousands of other races on the thousands of other planets. And puny, aggressive Man had always won, always triumphed. . . .

Puss mewed softly and Anthor lifted her down from the viewplate screen. He scratched her gently behind the ear and ran his hand through the fur on her back. It had been a good idea to bring her along on his one-man patrol vessel, he thought. She was a good cat, and good company, taking the curse of loneliness off his mission.

He turned for a last look at the viewplate before he went to the tiny food locker to get some cream for Puss. They were closer to the stellar system and under magnification he could see the single planet circling close about the red sun.

"We'll call it Omega," Anthor said quietly. "The last of them all." He stared at it for a fraction of a second longer, and then moved over to the food locker and set the cat down.

"We'll land tomorrow, Puss. First thing, tomorrow morning."

On the following morning the gauges showed no air on the outside of the vessel, so Anthor put on his vacuum suit and fitted Puss into the one he had built specially for her. It wouldn't do to leave her behind. She had come this far; she deserved to go the full length and help him claim the planet.

He stood for a moment in the lock, casually testing the suits, and finally opened up the last port. The small plain at the foot of the rocket was crimson in the rays of the sun and he could feel the sharp cold swirl in the open lock.

Standing on the pumice-like ground outside, he knew it was a dead planet, slowly spiraling in on its orbit around the dying sun. He took a few paces and glanced at the horizon in back of the ship, the horizon that showed the sector of space from which he had come. There was a fabulous ribbon of light fanning out behind his vessel: the disc-shaped galaxy, seen end on. The friendly, blazing band of stars, he thought, that was the empire of the human race.

In front of him was nothing but the velvety blackness, spotted here and there with tiny glowing lights that were other galaxies, unthinkable distances away and forever unattainable. For him and the race, Omega was the last planet, the last speck of cosmic dust to feel the foot of Man.

"Come on, Puss," he said softly, "we've got some exploring to do."

A few hundred feet from the rocket, the plain ended in a jumble of tumbled rock and sharp spires of black slate towering to the unwinking stars. Anthor clambered to the top of a large boulder and carefully surveyed the land. He shivered slightly. It was a desolate land, bleak and foreboding in the dim light. Nothing but rock and crumbly soil and,

several miles away, a small sea of oily liquid that lapped quietly at its frozen shores. The white of ice and methane snow was everywhere, and the cold seeped into the articulations of his suit.

An old world. A dead world that had probably never harbored life.

He stiffened and fumbled for a pair of binoculars at his waist. With them, a jumble of rocks by the shores of the far-off oily sea leaped closer. The rocks, he thought with mounting interest, were a little too angular, a little too regular to be just rock, and some of the spires of slate looked remotely like buildings of a weird, foreign culture.

He checked the pistol at his side and started cautiously towards the lake. "Let's go, Puss. They may be nothing but deserted ruins, but we have to make sure."

A HALF mile from the dead city, he dropped behind an outcropping and watched for any signs of life. There were none. The buildings gaped emptily along wide, paved streets that were filled with nothing but the dust of ages. An hour passed and still no sign of life in the avenues of the city.

Anthor checked his pistol against a far boulder, watching it flame into nothingness, and strode into the city. Closer up, the buildings inspired a feeling of awe. They soared for hundreds of stories, fragile and yet possessing tremendous strength, with slim bridges arching over at different levels high above the street. The street and the buildings were made of a glassy hard material that had apparently defied the elements of the dying world and even the ravages of time itself.

"They were a mighty race, Puss," Anthor said. "As mighty as our own, perhaps. Maybe even more so. They may have conquered the galaxy in their day, like we have in ours. Conquered everywhere but Time."

The silence was eerie, smothering. There was only Puss's occasional mew over the earphone and the sound of his

own feet on the pavement, carried by the air within his suit. Anthor felt an unreasonable desire to break the stifling silence, to shout and listen for his echo. But he knew there would be no answer; only the deadly stillness where the tenantless buildings rocked with silence and the empty avenues shrieked with quiet.

He shivered again and advanced up the street through the dead city. A few more blocks and the street widened out to form a square. The center of the city, Anthor thought, and the center of the civilization that had been.

At the precise middle of the square was what looked like statuary, and Anthor walked over to inspect it. The statue was of a colossal, vaguely anthropomorphic figure with a featureless face, looking back in the direction of the Milky Way. The figure was sculptured of a pale, translucent material; an heroic figure with, Anthor noted, small delicate chains binding it to its base.

"It's symbolism, Puss," Anthor said musingly. "I think, perhaps, it shows the fall and decline of this race, not by anything physical, but by something unseen, something more subtle than brute force."

Suddenly Puss arched within her suit and spat at some unknown danger. Anthor tensed, listening.

"You are correct," a voice within his earphones said.

Anthor whirled. For a moment he could see nobody and then, on the other side of the street, he spotted a space-suited figure like himself lounging against one of the glassy buildings.

"Who are you?" he snapped.

"Who do you think?" the voice in his phones said. "The last inhabitant of this city; in fact, the last creature alive of all my race."

The voice was alien and cold, frosted with the accents of the aged.

"You look—" Anthor began.

"No, I don't," the voice interrupted. "You only think I do. Actually, I look quite a bit like the . . . statue there. But

it's far easier to converse with alien races under a guise that resembles one of their own kind. Surely you know how prejudiced one can be by appearances."

Anthon agreed silently. It was no secret that you automatically felt more kindly disposed towards a race that at least vaguely resembled your own, rather than the monsters they had run across occasionally.

"I've waited a long time," the voice continued. "I had begun to despair that another race would ever land here, at life's end. This is always the last star to be conquered, the last planet to be colonized by each new, surging race."

The alien had a well developed sense of telepathy, Anthon thought; it must be reading his thoughts and projecting the image of the suit. He vaguely wondered what he would see behind the glass of the creature's helmet.

"Nothing," the voice said. "This is, so to speak, a mere sketch. It isn't necessary to do a full painting, to reproduce a duplicate of your kind down to the last cell. I have only a small time to converse, and for that, this image will do." It stopped for a moment, apparently thinking. "Your race is the most powerful in the whole galaxy, isn't it?"

Anthon nodded. "The stars belong to us, to no one else. We have won them and they are ours. No one opposes us."

"Your race is the new conqueror race, then, isn't it"—the speaker broke off and groped for a moment—"Anthon?"

"You could call us that if you wish."

"That's what we were called—once," the cold voice continued.

Anthon felt curious. "Yours must have been a mighty race," he said. "But what happened? I find it hard to believe that you were toppled by physical means. What killed your civilization?"

"Knowledge," the voice came back.

Anthon felt himself growing cold with a sudden foreboding. "How could knowledge harm you?"

"We were a proud race and knowledge killed our pride and, in turn, us. You see, Anthon, it was the knowledge

that we weren't the conquerors of the galaxy, we were only the caretakers!"

Anthon caught the implication. "And we, in turn, are succeeding you as caretakers?" he asked thinly.

He could sense the alien's agreement. "Do you not find it odd, Anthon, that nobody in the galaxy successfully opposed you?"

That was only partially true, Anthon thought. There had been battles and sieges. . . .

"Token resistance, Anthon, to calm your suspicions. The races who opposed you were only a tiny fraction compared to the ones that yielded without fighting. And what happened to them?"

"They serve a purpose," said Anthon calmly. "All the subservient races do."

THREE was a thin crackling in his ear-phones and Anthon had the uncomfortable feeling that the creature was laughing. "Consider what you gained by your victories, Anthon. Instead of the races taking care of themselves, you now take care of them. Who supplies their food, who sees that they remain in good health? Who supplies their shelter?"

"I don't follow you," Anthon said coldly.

"How many races have you domesticated, Anthon?"

"Thousands, I suppose."

"Consider one well known in your history, Anthon. Consider the cow. Who sees that it's fed? Who sees that its ills are taken care of? Who sees that it has shelter and, in fact, who even takes special pains to see that their race is perpetuated. Not the cow, Anthon. You."

"The fallacies of your argument are easily seen," Anthon said. "What you say is true, perhaps, but don't forget that their end is highly unpleasant. The cow pays for the luxurious life it leads."

"From the cow you extract milk and the steer you send to the slaughterhouse. Small compensation, Anthon, for the pleasant life it leads before then. All its

wants are cared for with no effort on its own part, and its end is one that it is doomed to sooner or later anyway. Who is the one who benefits the most? Who is slave and who master?"

"A hedonist philosophy," Anthor objected, "for a supposedly intelligent race. I find it hard to believe that an intelligent race would behave like that. All indications are that a truly intelligent race is not content merely to exist in comfort, but is an aggressive race, one that continually strives to expand, to attain, perhaps, the unattainable."

"It's all in your point of view," the voice laughed back coldly. "I find it interesting, incidentally, to note that your reactions are the same that members of my own race once had. But with increasing knowledge, your viewpoint will change. You see, there was a caretaker race before ours, just like we were the ones before you. Surely you remember some of our structures on some of the planets you conquered? The hidden reliés, overgrown with weeds, that the natives claimed no knowledge of?"

Anthor found himself trying to close his mind, trying desperately not to recall what the voice said. "What would you list as the qualifications for a caretaker race, as you call it?" he asked, half-believing.

"Caretaker races are chosen not for their intelligence, Anthor, but their stupidity. A race has to have a tremendous, rather stupid desire to expand, to conquer the whole galaxy. And then it has to have a certain egotistic viewpoint." The voice sounded fainter. "The viewpoint's the most important, Anthor."

The voice died and the figure some distance away shimmered and faded from view. Anthor hesitated and then ran over to where it had stood. There

was nothing there but a few shards of a glassy hard substance that were as translucent as pale milk. A silicon sort of life, he thought.

He stood there for a moment, holding one of the shards in his hand, then dropped it and started at a trot back to the ship. He had imagined it, he thought frantically. The silence and the emptiness of the streets had weighed on him and he had imagined the entire encounter. It wasn't true, it wasn't true, it wasn't true....

It couldn't be.

BACK on board ship he turned the vessel towards the familiar band of stars that marked the friendly galaxy and fled back to home and the company of his own kind.

His mind had played tricks on him, he thought desperately. The cold and the loneliness and the emptiness of the void stretching beyond. They had all combined to work on his imagination.

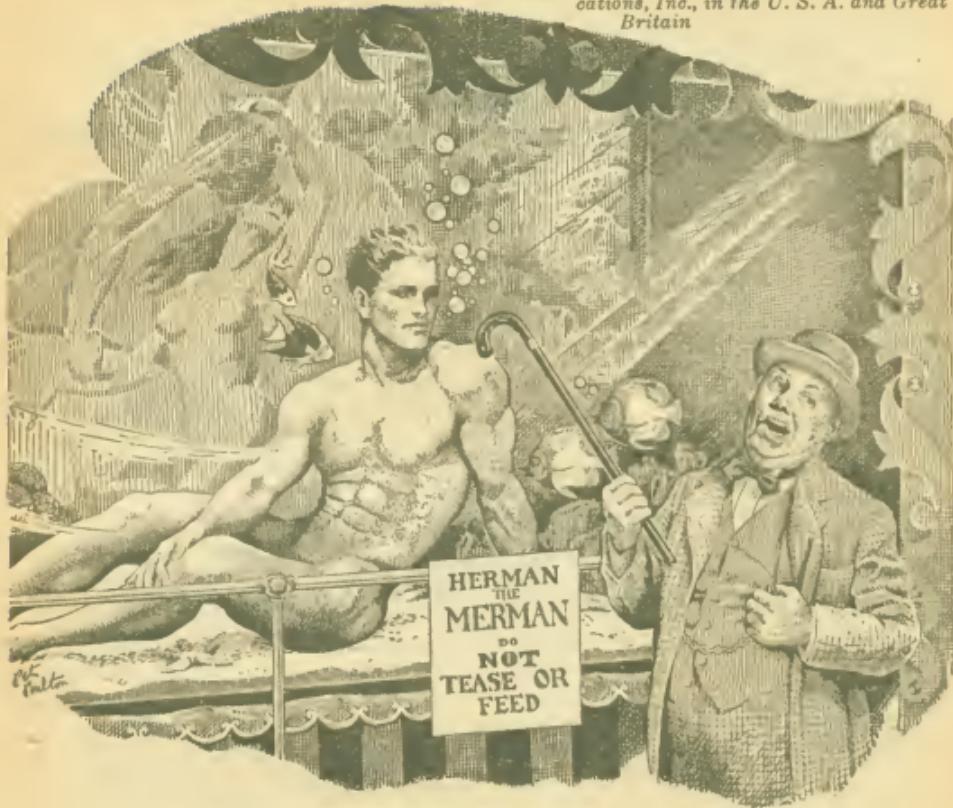
He had been away too long, he thought calmly. Once back in the company of his own kind, among the more civilized star systems, and he would see his own thoughts in the city as an interesting philosophical notion, but one that was easily disproven. A race that had come as far as theirs was slave to no other.

A mew from the other side of the cabin caught his attention and he turned to watch Puss. She was staring at him with emerald eyes and casually licking her whiskers. She was hungry, he knew, and waiting for him to fetch her milk.

He suddenly froze and stared at the cat with frightened eyes, while a slight bead of sweat gathered on his forehead.

Puss waited a moment longer, then yawned and switched her tail with impatient anger. M-meow...." she purred impatiently. "Mi-lll-k...."

Next issue: A tough Marine, a gorilla and an infant get themselves appalled intermixed in BABY-FACE, a laugh-packed tale of switched brains by HENRY KUTTNER!



"I feel like a fish," he said—and he meant it

THE MERMAN

By L. SPRAGUE De CAMP

JOVE nods occasionally, so Vernon Brock forgot to wind his alarm clock, and as a result arrived at his office with the slightly giddy feeling that comes of having had no breakfast but a hasty cup of coffee.

He glanced at the apparatus that filled half the scant space in the room. He thought, You'll be famous yet if this works, my lad, and sat down at his desk. He thought, being an assistant aquarist isn't such a bad job. Of course there's

There was something fishy about Brock. But that

wasn't surprising, under all the circumstances....

never enough money or enough room or enough time, but that's probably the case in most lines of work.

The office was really quiet. The chatter and shuffle of the visitors to the aquarium never penetrated; the only sounds were those of running water, the hum of the pump-motors, and the faint ticking of typewriters. And he did love the work. The only thing that he possibly loved better than his fish was Miss Engholm, and for strategic reasons he wasn't telling anybody—least of all the lady—yet.

Nothing could have been sweeter than his interview with the boss yesterday. Clyde Sugden had said he was going to retire soon and that he was using his influence to have Brock advanced to his place. Brock had protested without much conviction that, after all, Hempl had been there longer than he, and so ought to have the job.

"No," the head aquarist had said. "The feeling does you credit, Vernon, but Hempl wouldn't do. He's a good subordinate, but has no more initiative than a lame libranch. And he'd never sit up all night nursing a sick octopus the way you would." And so forth. Well, Brock hoped he really was that good, and that he wouldn't get a swelled head. But, knowing the rarity of direct praise from superiors, he was determined to enjoy that experience to the utmost.

He glanced at his calendar pad. "Labeling": that meant that the labels on the tanks were out of date again. With the constant death of specimens and acquisition of new ones that characterized aquaria, this condition was chronic. He'd do some label-shifting this evening.

"Alligator": a man had phoned and said that he was coming in to present one to the institution. Brock knew what that meant. Some fat-headed tourist had bought a baby 'gator in Florida without the faintest notion of how to keep it properly, and now he would be dumping the skinny little wretch on the Aquarium before it died of starvation and the effects of well-meant ignorance. It happened all the time.

"Legislature": what the devil? Oh, yes, he was going to write to the Florida state legislature in support of a bill to prohibit the export of live alligators by more fat-headed tourists, while there were still some of the unfortunate reptiles left alive in the state.

Then there was the mail. Somebody wanted to know why her guppies developed white spots and died. Somebody wanted to know what kind of water plants to keep in a home aquarium, and the name of a reliable seller of such plants in Pocatello, Idaho. Somebody wanted to know how to tell a male from a female lobster. Somebody—this was in nearly illegible longhand, at which Brock cursed with mild irritation—"Dear Mr. Brock: I heard your lecture last June 18th on how we are dissended from fish. Now you made a pretty good speech but I think if you will excuse my frankness that you are all wrong. I got a theory that the fish is really dissended from us . . ."

HE PICKED up the telephone and said, "Please send in Miss Engholm." She came in; they greeted each other formally, and he dictated letters for an hour. Then he said, without changing his tone, "How about dinner tonight?" Somebody might come in, and he had a mild phobia about letting the office force in on his private affairs.

"Fine," said the girl. "The usual place?"

"Okay. Only I'll be late; labeling, you know . . ." He thought how surprised she'd be when he asked her to marry him. That would be after his promotion.

He decided to put in a couple of hours on his research before lunch. He tied on his old rubber apron and soon had the Bunsen burners going merrily. Motions were performe acrobatic in the confined space. But he had to put up with that until the famous extension was finished. Then in a couple of years they'd be as cramped as ever again.

Sugden stuck his white thatch in the door. "May we come in?" He introduced a man as Dr. Dumville of the

Medical Center. Brock knew the physiologist by reputation, and was only too glad to explain his work.

"You're of course familiar, Doctor," he said, "with the difference between lung-tissue and gill-tissue. For one thing, gill-tissue has no mucus-secreting cells to keep the surfaces moist out of water. Hence the gills dry and harden and no longer pass oxygen one way and carbon dioxide the other as they should. But the gills of many aquatic organisms can be made to function out of water by keeping them moist artificially. Some of these forms regularly come out of water for considerable periods, like the fiddler-crab and the mud-skipper. They're all right as long as they can go back and moisten their gills occasionally."

"But in no case can a lung be used as a gill, to extract oxygen dissolved in water, instead of absorbing it from the air. I've been studying the reasons for this for some years. They're partly mechanical—the difficulty of getting anything as dense as water in and out of the spongy lung-structure fast enough—partly a matter of the different osmotic properties of the breather-cells, which are each adapted to operate on oxygen of a given concentration dispersed in a medium of given density.

"I've found, however, that the breather-cells of lung-tissue can be made to react to certain stimuli so as to assume the osmotic properties of gill-tissue. And that's a batch of my stimulus boiling up there. It consists mainly of a mixture of halogen-bearing organic compounds. A good dose of the vapor of that stuff in the lungs of one of the young alligators in this tank should enable him to breathe under water, if my theory is correct."

"I'd suggest one thing," said Dumville, who had been giving polite but interested grunts. When you hold your alligator under water, his glottal muscles will automatically contract, sealing off his lungs to keep out the water. Then he'll suffocate."

"I've thought of that, and I'll para-

lyze the nerves controlling those muscles first, so he'll have to breathe water whether he wants to or not."

"That's the idea. Say, I want to be in on this. When are you going to try out your first alligator?"

THEY TALKED until Sugden began clearing his throat meaningfully. He said, "There's a lot more to see, Dr. Dumville. You've got to take a look at our new extension. We certainly sweat blood getting the city to put up the money for it." He got Dumville out, and Brock could hear his voice dying away: ". . . it'll be mostly for new pumping and filtering machinery; we haven't half the space we need now. There'll be two tanks big enough for the smaller cetacea, and we'll finally have some direct sunlight. You can't keep most of the amphibia without it. We had to take half the damned old building apart to do it. . . ." Brock smiled. The extension was Sugden's monument, and the old boy would never retire until it was officially opened.

Brock turned back to his apparatus. He had just begun to concentrate on it when Sam Baritz stuck his gargoyle's face in. "Say, Vernon, where you gonna put the bichir? It gets in tomorrow."

"Mmm—clear the filefish out of forty-three, and we'll make up a batch of Nile water this afternoon for it. It's too valuable to risk with other species until we know more about it. And—oh, hell, put the filefish in a reserve tank for the present."

That means another new label, he thought as he turned back to his chemicals. What would be a good wording? "Esteemed as food." Yes. "Closely related to fossil forms?" Too indefinite. "Related to fossil forms from which most modern fish and all the higher vertebrates are descended." More like it. Maybe he could work in the words "living fossil" somehow.

In his abstraction he hadn't noticed that the flask into which the oily liquid was dripping had been nudged too close to the edge of the table. The slam of a

dropped plank, from the extension where construction was still going on, made him start nervously, and the flask came loose and smashed on the floor. Brock yelped with dismay and anger. Three weeks' work was spread over the floor. He took his morning paper apart and swept up glass and solution. As he knelt over the wreckage, the furnes made his eyes water. In his annoyance it never occurred to him that a man's lungs aren't so different from an alligator's.

He answered the telephone. It was Halperin, the goldfish man. "I'm making a little trip down south. Do you guys want me to pick up some bowfin or gar?" Brock said he'd have to ask Sugden and would call back. "Well, don't take too long, Vernon, I'm leaving this afternoon. Be seein' you."

Brock set out on the long semicircular catwalk over the ground-floor tanks that led around to the rear of the building and the entrance to the extension. As an old aquarium man he walked without faltering; he could imagine Dumville's cautious progress, clutching pipes and the edges of reserve tanks while glancing fearfully into the water below.

Brock's lungs ached queerly. Must have gotten a whiff of that gunk of mine, he thought; that was a fool thing to do. But there couldn't have been enough to do any real harm. He kept on. The ache got worse; there was a strange suffocating sensation. He decided to see a doctor after he delivered Halperin's message to Sugden. He kept on.

His lungs seemed to be on fire. Hurry—hurry—Dumville's an M. D.; maybe he could fix him up. Brock couldn't breathe. He wanted water—not, oddly, in his throat, but in his lungs. The cool depths of the big tank and the end of the semicircle were below him. This tank held the sharks; the other big tank, for groupers and other giants of the bass tribe, was across from it.

His lungs burned agonizingly. He tried to call out, but only made a faint croaking noise. The tangle of pipes

seemed to whirl around him. The sound of running water became a roar. He swayed, missed a snatch at the nearest reserve tank, and pitched into the shark tank.

HE HAD water in his eyes, in his ears, everywhere. The burning in his lungs was lessening, and in place of it came a cold feeling throughout his chest. The bottom came up and bumped him softly. He righted himself. That was wrong; he should have floated. Then the reason came to him; his lungs were full of water, so that his specific gravity was one point something. He wondered for a confused minute if he was already drowned. He didn't feel drowned, only very wet and very cold inside. In any event he'd better get out of here quickly.

He kicked himself to the surface, reached up and grabbed the catwalk and tried to blow the water out of his lungs. It came, slowly, squirting out of his mouth and nostrils. He tried inhaling some air. He thought he was getting somewhere, when the sensation returned. In spite of himself he ducked and inhaled water. Then he felt all right.

Everything seemed topsy-turvy. Then he remembered the liquid he'd prepared for the alligator; it must have worked on him! His lungs were functioning as gills. He couldn't quite believe it yet. Experimenting on an alligator is one thing: turning yourself into a fish is another. But there it was. If he'd been going to drown he'd have done so by now. He tried a few experimental breaths under water. It was amazingly hard work. You put on pressure, and your lungs slowly contracted, like a pneumatic tire with a leak. In half a minute or so you were ready to inhale again. The reason was the density of water compared with that of air, of course. But it seemed to work. He released the catwalk and sank to the bottom again. He looked around him. The tank seemed smaller than it should be; that was the effect of the index of

refraction of water, no doubt. He walked toward one side, which seemed to recede as he approached it. A fat nurse-shark lying on the bottom waved its tail gracefully and slid forward out of his way.

The other two nurse-sharks were lying indifferently on the bottom across the tank. These brutes were sluggish and utterly harmless. The two sand-sharks, the four-footer and the five-footer, had ceased their interminable cruising and backed into far corners. Their mouths opened and closed slowly, showing their formidable teeth. Their little yellow eyes seemed to say to Brock, "Don't start anything you can't finish, buddy." Brock had no intention of starting anything.

He'd had a healthy respect for the species since one of them had bitten him in the gluteus maximus while he was hauling it into a boat.

He looked up. It was looking up at a wrinkled mirror, with a large circular hole in it directly over his head. Through the hole he could see the reserve tanks, the pipes—everything that he could have seen by sticking his head out of water. But the view was distorted and compressed around the edges, like a photograph taken with wide-angle lens. One of the aquarium's cats peered down inscrutably at him from the catwalk. Beyond the circle on all sides the water surface was a mirror that rippled and shivered. Over the two sand-sharks were their reflections, upside down,

He turned his attention to the glass front of the tank. That reflected things too, as the lamps suspended over the water made the inside brighter than the outside. By putting his head close to the glass he could see the Aquarium's interior concourse. Only he couldn't see much of it for the crowd in front of the tank.

They were all staring at him; in the dim light they seemed all eyeballs. Now and then their heads moved and their mouths moved, but Brock got only a faint buzz.

THIS WAS all very interesting, Brock thought, but what was he to do? He couldn't stay in the tank indefinitely. For one thing, the coldness in his chest was uncomfortable. And God only knew what terrible physiological effect the gas might have had on him. And this breathing water was hard work, complicated by the fact that unless watched carefully his glottis would snap shut, stopping his breath altogether. It was like learning to keep your eyes open under water. He was fortunate in having fallen into a tank of salt water; fresh water is definitely injurious to lung-tissue, and so it might have been even to the modified tissue of his lungs.

He sat down crosslegged on the bottom. Behind him the large sand-shark had resumed its shuttling, keeping well away from him and halting suspiciously every time he moved. Two remoras, attached to the shark by the sucking-disks on top of their heads, trailed limply from it. There were six of these original hitch-hikers in the tank. He peered at the glass front. He took off his glasses experimentally, and found that he could see better without them—a consequence of the different optical properties of water and air. Most of the Aquarium's visitors were now crowded in front of that tank, to watch a youngish man in a black rubber apron, a striped shirt, and the pants of a gray flannel suit sit on the bottom of a tank full of sharks and wonder how in hell he was going to get out of this predicament.

Overhead, there was no sign of anybody. Evidently nobody had heard him fall in. But soon one of the small staff would notice the crowd in front of the tank and investigate. Meanwhile he'd better see just what he could do in this bizarre environment. He tried to speak but his vocal cords, tuned to operate in a negligibly dense medium, refused to flutter fast enough to emit an audible sound. Well, maybe he could come to the surface long enough to speak and duck under again. He rose to the top and tried it. But he had trouble getting

his watersoaked breathing and speaking apparatus dry enough to use for this purpose. All he produced were gurgling noises. And while the air no longer burned his lungs on immediate contact, keeping his head out soon gave him a dizzy, suffocating feeling. He finally gave up and sank to the bottom again.

He shivered with the cold, although the water was sixty-five degrees Fahrenheit. He'd better move around to warm up. The apron hampered him and he tried to untie the knot in back, but the water had swollen the cords so that the knot wouldn't budge. He finally wriggled out of it, rolled it up, stuck his arm out of water, and tossed the apron onto the catwalk. He thought of removing his shoes, too, but remembered the sand-sharks' teeth.

Then he did a bit of leisurely swimming, round and round, trying to keep the width of the tank between him and them. The motion warmed him, but he soon tired. Evidently the rapid metabolism of a mammal took about all the oxygen that his improvised gills could supply, and they wouldn't carry much overload. He reduced his swimming to an imitation of a seal's, legs trailing and hands flapping at his sides. The crowd, as he passed the front of the tank, was thicker than ever. A little man with a nose that swerved to starboard watched him with peculiar intentness.

A JARRING SOUND came through the water, and presently figures, grotesquely shortened, appeared at the edge of the circle of transparency overhead. They grew rapidly taller, and he recognized Sugden, Dumville, Sam Baritz, and a couple of other members of the staff. They clustered on the catwalk, and their excited voices came to him, muffled but intelligible. They knew what had happened to him, all right. He tried by sign language to explain his predicament. They evidently thought he was in a convulsion, for Sugden barked, "Get him out!" Baritz's thick forearm shot down into the water to

seize his wrist. But he wrenched loose before they had him clear of the surface, and dove for the bottom.

"Acts like he don't wanna come out," said Baritz.

Sugden leaned over. "Can you hear me?" he shouted. Brock nodded vigorously.

"Can you speak to us?" Brock shook his head.

"Did you do this to yourself on purpose?" A violent shake of Brock's head.

"Accident?" Brock nodded. "Do you want to get out?" Brock nodded and shook his head alternately. Sugden frowned in perplexity. Then he said, "Do you mean you'd like to but can't because of your condition?" Brock nodded.

Sugden continued his questions. Brock, growing impatient at this feeble method of communication, made writing motions. Sugden handed down a pencil and a pocket notebook. But the water immediately softened the paper so that the pencil, instead of making marks, tore holes in it. Brock handed them back.

Sugden said, "What he needs is a wax tablet and stylus. Could you get us one, Sam?"

Baritz looked uncomfortable. "Cheez, boss, what place in N'yawk sells those things?"

"That's right; I suppose we'll have to make them ourselves. If we could melt a candle onto a piece of plywood—"

"It'll take all day for me to get the candle and stuff and do that, and we gotta do something about poor Vernon."

Brock noticed that the entire staff was now lined up on the catwalk. His beloved was well down the line, almost out of sight around the curve. At that angle the refraction made her look as broad as she was tall. He wondered if she'd look like that naturally after they'd been married a while. He'd known it to happen. No, he meant if they got married. You couldn't expect a girl to marry a man who lived under water.

While Sugden and Baritz still bickered, he had an idea—but how to com-

municate it? Then he saw a remora lying below him. He splashed to attract the attention of those above, and sank down slowly. He grabbed the fish in both hands and kicked himself over to the glass. The remora's nose—or, to be exact, its undershot lower jaw—made a visible streak on the pane. He rolled over on his back, and saw that he was understood; Sugden was calling for someone to go down to the floor and read his message.

His attempt at writing was hampered by the fish's vigorous efforts to escape. But he finally got scrawled on the glass in large wobbly capitals:

**2 WEIGHTED STEPLADDERS
—1 WEIGHTED PLANK—
1 DRY TOWEL**

While they were getting these, he was reminded by his stomach that he'd had no solid food for eighteen hours or thereabouts. He glanced at his wrist watch, which, not being waterproof, had stopped. He handed it up, hoping that somebody would have the sense to dry it out and take it to a jeweler.

The stepladders were lowered into the tank. Brock set them a few feet apart, and placed the plank across their tops. Then he lay on his back on the plank, his face a few inches below the surface. He dried his hands on the towel, and by cocking one leg up he could hold a pad out of water against his knee and write on it.

HE EXPLAINED tersely about the accident and his subsequent seizure, and told what had happened chemically to his lung-tissues. Then he wrote: "As this is the first experiment on living organism, don't know when effect will pass if ever. Want lunch."

Baritz called to him, "Don't you want us to take the sharks out first?" Brock shook his head. The claims of his stomach were imperious, and he had a vague hope of solving his problem without disturbing the fish. Then too, though he'd have hated to admit it, he knew

that everybody knew that the sharks weren't man-eaters, and he didn't want to seem afraid of them. Even a sensible man like Vernon Brock will succumb to a touch of bravado in the presence of his woman, actual or potential.

He relaxed, thinking. Sugden was ordering the staff back to its work. Dumville had to leave, but promised to be back. By and by the faithful Baritz appeared with what Brock hoped was food. Brock's position struck him as an uncomfortable one for eating, so he rolled off the plank and stood on the bottom of the tank. Then he couldn't reach the surface with his hand. Baritz thrust a lamb chop on the end of a stick down to him. He reached for it—and was knocked aside by a glancing blow from something heavy and sand-papery. The lamb chop was gone—or not quite gone; the larger shark had it over in a corner. The shark's jaw worked, and the bone sank slowly to the bottom, minus its meat.

Baritz looked helplessly at Sugden. "We betta not try meat again—those sharks can smell it, and they might get dangerous if we got them worked up."

"Guess we'll have to get the net and haul them out," said Sugden. "I don't see how he could eat mashed potatoes under water."

Brock swam up, and went through the motions of peeling and eating a banana. After Baritz had made a trip for bananas Brock satisfied his hunger, though he found swallowing food without getting a stomachful of salt water required a bit of practice.

The crowd in front of the tank was larger, if anything. The little man with the wry nose was still there. His scrutiny made Brock vaguely uneasy. He always wondered what a fish on exhibit felt like, and now by George, he knew.

If he could get out and do a few months' research, he might be able to find how to counteract the effect of the lung-gas. But how could he perform experiments from where he was? Maybe he could give directions and have somebody else carry them out. That

would be awkward, but he didn't want to spend the rest of his life as an exhibit, loyal as he was to the Aquarium. A better idea might be to rig up some sort of diver's helmet, to wear out of water with the water inside if he could find a way of oxygenating the water.

Baritz appeared again, and put his head down close to the water. "Hey, Vernon!" he said, "God's coming down here!"

Brock was interested, though not by the theological aspects of the statement. God, better known as J. Roosevelt Whitney, was the president of the Zoological Society, and the boss of Minnegerode, the director of the Aquarium (in Bermuda at the moment). Minnegerode was Sugden's boss. God, the head of this hierarchy, owned among other things a bank and a half, 51% of a railroad, and the finest walrus mustache anywhere.

Baritz put on his child-frightening grin. "Say, Vernon, I just thought. We can advertise you as the only mermaid in captivity!"

Brock throttled an impulse to pull his helper into the tank, and motioned for his pad. He wrote: "The male of 'mermaid' is 'merman,' you ape!"

"Okay, a merman, unless the gas changed more than your lungs. Oh, good afternoon, Mr. Whitney. Here he is in this tank. Anything I can do Mr. Whitney?"

A famous mustache floated above the water like a diving seagull. "How ah you, my deah boy? Ah you making out all right? Don't you think we'd bettah get the sharks out right away? They're perfectly harmless, of course, but you might accidentally jostle one and get nipped. Ha-ha."

Brock, who at thirty-two was pleased rather than irked at being called "My boy," nodded. J. R. started to get to his feet, not noticing that one foot was planted on Brock's rolled-up apron, while the toe of the other was caught in it. Brock received a tremendous impact of sound and current, and through the sudden cloud of bubbles saw J. R.'s

massive rear descending on him. He caught the man and shoved him up. As the pinky head cleared the surface, he heard a terrified scream of "Glugg—blubb—Oh God, get me out! The sharks! Get me out, I say!"

Brock boosted and Baritz and Sugden heaved. The dripping deity receded down the catwalk, to Brock's distorted vision broadening to something like a Daily Worker cartoon of Capital. He wished he knew whether J. R. would be angry or whether he'd be grateful for the boost. If he inquired about the apron it might be embarrassing.

THE COLD was biting Brock's innards, and the bananas seemed to have turned into billiard balls on his stomach. The little man with the nose was still there, although it was nearly closing time. Brock climbed onto his plank and wrote directions: "Raise temperature of feed-water slowly. Get me thermometer. Will signal when temperature is right. Should be about 90 F. Run more air-lines into tank to make up for lowering oxygen saturation point. Put sharks in reserve tank for present; warmth might harm them, and I need all oxygen in tank."

By 9 P. M. all was done. The tearful Miss Engholm had been shooed away. Baritz volunteered to spend the night, which proved to be the most uncomfortable of Brock's experience. He couldn't sleep because of the constant muscular effort required to work his lungs. He tried to think his way out of the mess, but his thoughts became more and more confused. He began to imagine things: that the little man with the nose had been there for no good, for instance. Just for what, he couldn't think, but he was sure it was something. Again and again he wondered what time it was. At first he aroused Baritz to tell him at intervals, but toward two o'clock Sam went to sleep on the catwalk, and Brock hadn't the heart to awaken him.

God, would the night never end? Well, what if it did? Would he be any better

off He doubted it. He looked at his hands, at the skin of his fingers swollen and wrinkled by soaking. A crazy idea grew on him with the force of an obsession. His hands would turn into fins. He'd grow scales . . .

It was getting light. Then all these people would come back to torment him. Yes, and the little man with the nose. The little man would put a worm on a hook and catch him and eat him for supper . . .

Under sufficiently strange circumstances the human mind is often thrown out of gear and spins ineffectually without definite relationship to external things. Perhaps that is because of a weakness in the structure of the mind, or perhaps it is a provision by nature to disconnect it to avoid stripped gears when the load is too heavy.

People were coming in; it must be after nine o'clock. People on the catwalk overhead were talking, but he couldn't understand them. His lungs weren't working right—or rather his gill. But that was wrong. He was a fish, wasn't he? Then what could be wrong with them?

All these people who had it in for him must have turned off the oxygen. No, the air-lines were still shooting their stream of tiny bubbles into the tank. Then why this suffocating feeling? He knew; that wasn't air in the air-lines; it was pure nitrogen or helium or something. They were trying to fool him. Oh God, if he could only breathe! Maybe he had the fish's equivalent of asthma. Fish came to the surface and gulped sometimes; he'd try that. But he couldn't; his experiences of the preceding day had given him a conditioned reflex against sticking his head out, which his shattered reason was unable to overcome.

Was he going to die? Too bad, when he had been going to marry Miss Engholm and all. But he couldn't have married her anyway. He was a fish. The female fish lays her eggs, and then the male fish comes along and—His face twisted in an insane grin at the grotesque thought that struck him.

He was dying. He had to get oxygen. Why not go through the glass? But no, any intelligent fish knew better than to try to make holes in the glass. Then he saw the little man with the nose standing and staring as he had yesterday. He thought, You'll never catch me on a hook and eat me for supper; you piscicide; I'm going to get you first. He fished out his jack-knife and attacked the pane. A long scratch appeared on it, then another, and another. The glass sang softly. The people behind the little man were moving back nervously, but the little man still stood there. The song of the glass rose up—up—up.

The glass, with a final ping, gave, and several tons of green water flung themselves onto the concourse. For a fleeting second Brock, knife in hand, seemed to be flying toward the little man. Then the iron railing in front of the tank came up and hit his head.

He had a vague sense of lying on a wet tile floor, while a foot away from his ringing head a stranded remora flopped helplessly.

HE WAS lying in bed, and Sugden was sitting beside him, smoking. The old man said, "Lucky you didn't get a fractured skull; but maybe it was a good thing. It put you out during the critical period when your lungs were changing back to normal. They'd have had to dope you anyway, out of your head as you were."

"I'll say I was out of my head! Wait till I see your friend Dumville; I'll be able to describe a brand new psychosis to him."

"He's a physiologist," replied Sugden, "not a psychologist. But he'll want to see you just the same."

"The doctor tells me you'll be out tomorrow, so I guess you're well enough to talk business. J.R. didn't mind the ducking, even after the exhibition he made of himself. But there's something more serious. Perhaps you noticed a small man with a crooked nose in front of the tank while you were there?"

"Did I notice him!"

"Well, you nearly drowned him when you let the water out of the tank. And he's going to sue us for damages—up in five or six figures. You know what that means."

Brock nodded glumly. "I'll say I do. It means that I don't get your job when you retire next winter. And then I can't get ma— never mind. Who is this little guy; A professional accident faker?"

"No; we investigated him. He was a trapeze artist in a circus until recently; he says he was getting too old for that work, but he didn't know any other. Then he hurt his back in a fall, and he's been on relief since. He just came in to watch you because he had nothing else to do."

"I see." Brock thought. "Say, I have an idea. Nurse! Hey, nurse! My clothes! I'm going out!"

"No, you're not," said Sugden firmly. "Not till the doc says you can. But that'll be tomorrow, and then you can try out your idea. And I hope," he added grimly, "that it's better than the last one."

Two days later Brock knocked on Sugden's door. He knew that Sugden and J. R. were in there, and he could guess what they were talking about. But he had no fears.

"Morning, Mr. Whitney," he said cheerfully.

"Oh—ah—yes, my deah boy. We were just talking about this most unfortunate—ah—"

"If you mean the suit, that's off."

"What?"

"Sure, I fixed it. Mr. Oscar Daly, the plaintiff, and I are going into a kind of partnership."

"Partners?"

"Yes, to exploit my discovery of lung-conversion. I supply the technique so that he can exhibit himself in circuses as Oscar the Merman. He dopes himself with my gas and parks in a tank. Our only problem is the period when the effect of the gas wears off and the lungs return to normal. That, I think, can be licked by the use of any of several anesthetic drugs that slow down the metabolism. So, when the human fish begins to feel funny, he injects himself and passes out peacefully, while his assistants fish him out and wring the water out of his lungs. There are still a few technical details to work out on my alligators, but that'll be all right. I'll wear a gas mask. Of course," he added virtuously, "any monetary returns from the use of the process will go to the Zoological Society. Oscar says to send your lawyer over any time and he'll sign a release."

"Why, that's fine," said Whitney, "that's splendid, my boy. It makes a big difference." He looked significantly at Sugden.

"Thanks," said Brock. "And now, if you'll excuse me, Sam and I have some fish to shift. So long, and I hope you drop in often, Mr. Whitney." He went out whistling.

"Oh, Vernon!" the head aquarist called after him. "Tomorrow's Sunday, and I'm driving my family out to Jones Beach. Like to come along for a swim?"

Brock stuck his grinning head back in. "Thanks a lot, Clyde, but I'm afraid I might carelessly take a deep breath under water. To be honest, the mere idea gives me the horrors. I've had enough swimming to last me the rest of my natural life!"

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Divided | We Fall

By ALFRED COPPEL

FROM the SAN FRANCISCO HERALD, December 12, 1949:

"Well, they're back, indeed they are. Along with Santa Claus, Christmas neckties and hot Tom and Jerries, those Flying Saucers are here again. No less than eight 'sightings' have been reported in the last three days. Wags are suggesting that what has been seen by observers in various parts of the country is Saint Nick's sleigh and deer making their pre-holiday test flights. . . ."

* * *

From a statement to the Allied Press by Lt. Col. E. M. L. Butler, Public Relations Officer of Air Force Project SAUCER:

"It is regrettable that the announcement that Project SAUCER would be abandoned has brought on another rash of so-called 'sightings' of all manner of strange airborne objects. Mass hysteria is infecting many otherwise normal individuals. Not to be ignored, too, is the simple fact that people like to get their names in the papers—like to attract attention. In view of the strained international situation, your Air Force feels that SAUCER has done its work and should now be disbanded. Money, gentlemen, is important. We plan to spend on useful things, ships and planes and bombs . . . and fewer fanciful speculations."

From an intelligence report to the President of the United States, March 27, 1950:

".... their intent is obvious. Agents within the Red security cordon report that the city of Atomgrad will soon be the site of a hydrogen-fusion bomb test. If this test is successful, and we have reason to believe that it will be, then war within four years becomes a definite probability. Under the circumstances, this evaluation board must recommend that Strategic Air Command be placed on a combat readiness basis and prepared to retaliate."

* * *

From a note handed to the U. S. Chargé d'Affairs, Bucharest, May 1, 1950:

".... by the People's Government of Romania. Further violations of our borders by American aircraft of unfamiliar design and belligerent intent will be met with direct action by the People's Air Forces...."

* * *

From a letter to FACT MAGAZINE, June 6, 1950:

".... since you people are probably the only ones who are interested anymore; everybody else thinks I'm seeing things and believe me I'm not at all. On the first of the month, this month that is, about six thirty AM I was heading for work at the mill and this thing I saw come over the Saginaw Hills just south of here fast. It was long, sort of cigar-shaped and it shined like metal where the sun hit it, but is wasn't any airplane. I know what an airplane looks like and this was more like a zeppelin trailing smoke.

"It come low over the valley where I was and then it pulled up right straight and disappeared into the sky right over my head. There were no clouds and it just disappeared like these pictures I saw in the newsreels of those German rockets going up. I really saw this but I'm not telling anyone else about it because everybody just laughs when I bring it up. Now I read your magazine all the time and I like it real well and I

don't figure you'll think I'm lying about having seen every last thing I've said I saw because you said in your ed. column that anybody who should see something funny like that should get in touch with you"

* * *

From the Syndicated Column AS I SEE IT by Commentator Robert S. Wisdom, July 30, 1951:

".... while men are dying in Korea. I am reminded that not so long ago, our people were seeing discs and saucers in the sky. No, imagination is not what is needed in this half of the century. Rather fortitude, resolution, and above all—forbearance."

* * *

From the Fortean Society Magazine, DOUBT, December 1, 1951:

".... fireballs in the sky, red rain and spaceships. We are property we are property and let no one deny it along with the Hollow Earth Theory and the Gelatinous Sky Hypothesis. Merry Christmas, fellow readers, from the Retail Merchants Association, for whom JC died."

* * *

From a flight report filed by a transpacific pilot, March 3, 1951:

".... seven discs, flying at eighty to ninety feet above the water, at high speed...."

Addendum in manuscript:

"Evans:—I think Willoughby needs a rest. See to it."

* * *

From the Syndicated Column AS I SEE IT by Robert S. Wisdom, April 10, 1952:

"The news tonight is bad. No armistice in Korea, and the talks at a standstill. Rumors of an H-bomb test by the Soviets are breathing new life into demands for a preventative war. Here in Washington, Republican and Democratic lawmakers are saying privately that a shooting war may start at any time. The UN, weakened by Korea and a thousand petty squabbles, is in mortal danger. One result of all this tension is a new rash of hallucinatory reports of

flying discs and similar objects. People, perhaps seeking a unifying danger, are seeing men from Mars in every loose weather balloon or burning meteor. Vain hope. Hoax is piled on hoax and if any serious observer were to suggest at this time that the Air Force's Project SAUCER left too many questions unanswered, he would be alternately lionized and victimized. . . ."

* * *

From a confidential report to MVD chief Laventry Beria, June 20, 1952:

" . . . discoid aircraft operating at high speed and great height over Atomgrad. Our interceptors were helpless, as the discs remained above the defender's operational ceiling of 50,000 feet. No hostile action. However, the reluctance of the Americans to actually start a conflict is well understood, but the violation of territory involved would make a sufficient *causus belli* should Politbureau decide to use it.

"The American Air Force denies that these craft are American, indeed, that they exist at all! It is my opinion that we may well be at the mercy of some deviationist American air commander, and since the craft are dangerously superior to our own, we would do well to consider that the time to strike is very near. . . ."

* * *

From a sermon by Billy Christie, Evangelist, delivered to a mass revival meeting in Madison Square Garden, November 30, 1952:

" . . . in the name of the Lord Jesus! These miracles have been seen by human eyes so that the Word Of God might spread among the sinful nations of the Earth. Angels in the sky are writing with letters of fire! Beware, O Mankind! Unite, O Mankind! Or Ye shall truly perish!"

* * *

From a letter to the NEW YORK STAR, January 3, 1953:

" . . . seen by eight people, all qualified observers, pilots, weather personnel

and aircraft dispatchers. It was disc shaped and traveling at great height and great speed. . . ."

* * *

From the NEW YORK STAR, January 30, 1953:

"A Defense Department spokesman again reiterated that the so-called saucers are either mass hallucinations or misinterpretations of commonplace astronomical phenomena. Project SAUCER will not be reactivated."

* * *

From KROKODIL, March 4, 1953:

"First Soviet Worker: 'What do you think of the new warplanes the Americans are building to look like saucers?'"

"Second Soviet Worker: 'Don't worry, our fighter pilots will soon make them into our glass of tea!'"

* * *

From a confidential report to the President of the United States, April 17, 1953:

"Atomgrad H-bomb test successful. Summary follows. . . ."

* * *

From the SAN FRANCISCO HERALD, June 9, 1953:

"Decentralization of industry has begun. Essential industries will be relocated in less vulnerable areas than the Pacific slope."

* * *

From COUNTERBLOW, anti-communist throwaway paper, August 2, 1953:

" . . . justify the money spent of Strategic Air Command. Hit 'em now. Hit 'em hard, in the old American Way. Let's not wait for their Sunday punch. Round up the native ones and then use the BOMB!"

* * *

From PRAVDA, August 2, 1953:

" . . . warmongering deviationists. Our airmen are ready, our army is ready. The time is coming when the People's Democracies of the world will be marching side by side in glorious brotherhood. The rottenness of the world will be cleansed. . . ."

From THE IOWA TIMES, December 21, 1953:

".... fireball in a cornfield...."

* * *

From a code dispatch to all Soviet Commanders, December 25, 1953:

".... all troops in readiness to move...."

* * *

From a radio address by the President-elect of the United States, January 1, 1954:

".... with the extention of the war in Asia. In view of this and other developments, I must ask that the Congress declare that a state of unlimited national emergency exists. I pray to almighty God that war may be averted, but if it comes, I ask that He preserve our land...."

* * *

From the SAN FRANCISCO HERALD, January 2, 1954:

"With the world on the brink of holocaust, a note of whimsy. Sightings of flying saucers have ceased. Not one report of a flying saucer has been made since the total mobilization of the Armed Forces."

* * *

From a dispatch from Kol Rhaniz Kar, Marshal of the Galactic Empire, to Vannor Thell Ten, Subcommander of Naval Forces in the Sol System, 443/766/6 Solestial Era.

".... that I be cursed with such abysmal stupidity in my subordinates. I have warned you repeatedly that under no circumstances should you allow yourselves to be observed, and yet their radio broadcasts have discussed you for weeks, months—even years! Highborn you may be, but stupid you are without question. Gather what wit you may have and read on.

"Our need is *land*. The population of the Galactic Empire is increasing tremendously since the enforcement of the fertility laws by the gelid ones. Sol 3

has been under surveillance as a possible colony since before you were born. Militarily, we cannot dispose of two billion of the indigenous fauna without colossal effort. The creatures are valueless as slaves. But since they are warlike and unreasoning, and since they have found the means of self-decimation, no risk of unifying them should ever be taken.

"You, a Subcommander of the Forces of the Galactic Empire, have injected such a risk into the situation. You have done this with a bland stupidity so monstrous that it leaves me speechless. Ever since your task force took over surveillance of the planet—June 1947, by their reckoning—the natives have been treated to views of scoutships, destroyers, scanners, mother-ships, and by the Dark Gods of Space, even satellite guard-stations!

"This must stop. It is only by the most fantastic chance—mixed with a mental torpor to match your own—that these creatures have not pieced together the existing situation. Had you so flagrantly insulted the observational powers and intelligence of any other race, you would have been recognized for what you are—the military agent of a galactic conqueror, and we would have had to face a warlike and united planet.

"Now, in the event that you have misunderstood the import of this dispatch: STAY HIDDEN. Remain on the far face of their satellite. Make no further reconnaissances until the war they are about to launch is well under way.

"You do, I presume, listen to their radio. Then try to remember one of their own pithy sayings and guide yourself accordingly. They say: 'united we stand.' and more to the point: 'divided we fall.'"

* * *

From a coded radio dispatch to certain Soviet air commanders, — —, 19—

".... attack attack attack attack...."

By THOMAS CALVERT McClARY



THE CASE OF *Jack Freysling*

He came of a strange family . . . whom Death touched lightly!

WE WERE casualties, sitting around the convalescing station at Darwin, waiting for odd pieces of ourselves to patch up. We had a lot of time on our hands for talk, and one of our favorite lighter themes, for some reason, was the latest list of known dead.

There was nothing morbid in this. It simply held common interest. Maybe it's that a fellow likes to know who is waiting for him at the other end if he has to hit the sky trail.

Jeff Lambert was reading off the morning list and suddenly stopped. He

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looked up, and around at the five of us, one by one, and said, "They got Jack Freysling in the Solomons."

We fell into that suspended silence of recollection. All of us had known Freysling, a wild, wacky galoot who had turned down a good exempt job at home to join up as groundhog with the flying jeeps. I recall him with flaming red hair, a voice like an organ, and the light of sixteen devils in his eyes. He had somehow acquired a love interest after hitting the island, and had not only been darned near butchered by the Japs, but very nearly court-martialed for sneaking through the lines one night.

There are some men whom you decide will have no number until they get to be at least ninety-four. Jack was that kind, and so it was something more than sadness that moved our silence. It was outright surprise. You simply could not believe that crazy coot was dead.

I was thinking that for about the tenth time when I heard Bill Hay chuckle. I looked around at him, and he was enjoying high humor, but he wasn't out of his head. I said pretty sharply, "I thought you were friends back home?"

"He isn't dead!" he scoffed. "You can't kill that bird!"

Jeff said soberly, "They don't make mistakes on these lists, Bill. They're careful not to list a man until they know for sure."

"Oh, they probably found his body, all right," Bill agreed. "But they've found it four or five times before that I know of."

Jeff peered at him intently. "You all right, boy, or has that wound got you?"

"I'm all right," Bill nodded adamantly. "But it wasn't the first time Jack died, I can tell you! It was the time after he committed suicide."

Now Bill was one of those good-natured, but exceedingly accurate and literal guys who never put a quarter inch on anything. When he said visibility was six and a half miles, it was six and a half, and not six and three quarters.

So we gave him more attention than we might have another of the crowd.

IT WAS this way," Bill said. "I had palled around with Jack for about five years in nearly every part of the country you can think of. I was on a transcontinental flight and kept getting special duty to off-the-rout airports, for some reason. It gave me layover time in a lot of strange ports, big and little. And almost any time at any of them, I was liable to run into Jack.

"He was a newspaper feature writer and he was always buzzing off on some wild yarn, half the time one of his own concoction. Sometimes these jaunts and his wayward habits would land him in difficulties. I guess I bumped into him under about every condition there is. One time he would be in jail; the next time just getting out of a hospital; the next time with a six-room suite at some swanky hotel. He was just that kind of mug. You expected it of him.

"He had a serious streak, but he kept it well hidden. It was three years before I knew he had anything in him but a devilish twisted humor to involve everyone he knew in some jam. Then one night I broke the ice and discovered this serious side of him. I didn't know until then that he had ever been married. But he had been, and had a daughter, and it turned out she was all the world to him.

"Well, this daughter had been ill almost since birth with some malady that no doctor could name. Jack had used every connection he had, and I guess his family had plenty of money, to get this kid cured. They had taken her to at least twenty specialists in three or four countries, but the kid was still sick. I won't forget the way he looked as he told about it. When he finished, he gave me a long, intent look, but somehow as if he were way out in space and looking at me from there. He said, 'Bill, that kid can be cured, and I am going to find out how. But if she isn't, if anything ever happened to her, I'd bust out of this world fast!'

"He was serious enough, but a man is liable to think those things at such times, and I never gave it a second thought until he committed suicide. That was in New York in 1939, and brother, there was no mistake! He left a note saying what he was going to do in his hotel room. He paid his bills, and for about two weeks made a point of seeing his friends. He gave no sign of what he had in mind, and that was why they were extra careful to make sure that it was Jack. When the time came, he went to the top of an office building and jumped.

"The fall smashed him up pretty badly, but it didn't hurt his face, or one of his hands. He had destroyed all identity on him and that was the reason for the first check. They had to find out who he was from his fingerprints. There wasn't any doubt of them, but to make sure, they had five people identify him at the morgue. I was one of them.

"Now there wasn't the slightest possibility that it was not Jack. I saw him, and looked at him, a long time, and he didn't look any different than he had a month before. It was Jack Freysling, and nobody else. In the course of time they found his exwife, who identified him again. She said she was not surprised. She let it go at that, but I found out the kid had died only a short time before.

THAT was in November of '39. In February of '40, I went to Rio for a special job. I was cooling off with some frosty drink at the Continental when Jack walked in. He walked smack up and stood beside me and ordered a drink. I said something dopey, like 'You can't do this. You're dead!'

"Oh, again?" he grinned.

"I got pretty stiff. You begin to think you're nuts yourself when something like that happens. I must have gone over the whole thing a dozen times that night with him, but I couldn't get anything but amused remarks out of him. The next morning I decided I had been

just plain cockeyed drunk, or touched with some jungle fever. But he was registered in the hotel.

"I saw a lot of him for two weeks, and the thing worried me so much I stole his fingerprints and sent them back to New York. A friend got in touch with the police, and in the course of a few days wired back, 'Fingerprints belong to a Jack Freysling who committed suicide here in November. Are you carrying around a corpse?'

"I wasn't sure myself, but I readjusted my life and had about gotten used to living with an unsolvable mystery when he got killed in the mountains back of Rio. He was shot by accident on a hunting trip, a clean shot right smack through the heart. They brought his body down, and it was his and no mistake. Just for good measure, the consul sent up his fingerprints, and got his identification back. They couldn't locate anyone related to him nearer than a cousin who cabled them to bury him down there. He was buried in Rio, with half a dozen people who had known him in years gone by taking a last view of the body and attending the funeral. I was one of them.

"To tell the truth, it was a relief in a way. There is something darned creepy about talking and drinking with a man you know is dead!

"Well, that was near the end of April. In October I was driving up Santa Monica boulevard in Los Angeles when a voice like a loudspeaker hollered at me to pull over. I did, automatically. I don't know that I was exactly afraid, but it was something close to it; an unexplainable fear that it would be Jack Freysling.

"It was. A car pulled up behind mine, and he got out, and came up grinning and whacked me on the shoulder. He had the devil in his blue eyes as he looked at me, and he stood there and asked, 'What's wrong with you, Bill? Bring back some of that jungle fever from Rio?'

"Well, we went and had some drinks

and went through the same thing all over again. If he was real, he had been in Rio. He had seen me there, and he recalled precise things we had done together in every detail. He admitted going off on that last hunting trip. But when I spoke about his death and identification and funeral, he simply grinned. When I tried to pin him on it, he'd come out with some crazy remark like, 'Boy, I'm always dying!'

"I saw a lot of him as usual for a week or two, but this time it was getting me. I went to three different alienists to be sure I wasn't crazy! I even took him along to one. I'd go to bed dog-tired, and waken in the middle of the night in a cold sweat and wondering if I was crazy. We lived at the same hotel, and I'd go running, pretty near yelling, down to his room to see if he was still there—in the flesh.

"You can't fly a passenger plane in that condition, and without telling the boss why, I got switched onto freight flying. In the meantime, I stole his fingerprints again. I got them, and a dozen snapshots of him, and I checked in New York and Washington and Rio. It was Jack Freysling beyond a doubt. It was the same Jack Freysling who had jumped from a roof in New York, and been shot in the mountains back of Rio.

"I was in a flight east when he went up to Alaska on a story about the fishing industry. While he was writing the story, he went overboard in a rough sea and was drowned. They recovered his body, and there was no mistake. They shipped it down to Seattle, and his boss in New York flew out to identify it. The boss probably thought the other deaths had been hoaxes. This one was real. He had known Jack since he was in high school, and as well as face and fingerprints, he identified a ring and birthmark. I wasn't at that funeral, but I later saw people who were, and they knew for certain the body was put into the ground.

I had just about gotten over this when I went to London in the middle of

'41. I was sitting in what was left of Claridge's when Jack Freysling walked in, wearing a bomb helmet. I didn't say anything. I just stared at him, and felt the ice doing a machine gun act through my veins, and waited for him to talk.

"He ordered a drink and stood there chuckling for a while, and then said, 'Surprised? Suppose you thought I got washed out in Alaska?'

"I spent three terrible nights and days, and the bombing of the city didn't mean a thing. It was Jack Freysling's being alive that got me.

"You can stand just about so much of that, and then one of two things happens. Your mind accepts what it can't understand, or it cracks and you go nuts. I was lucky, unless I'm actually in a nut-hatch thinking all this now. My mind simply accepted it. I didn't try to solve it. Except for this, I did repeat the fingerprint business, and the man with those fingerprints had been buried in New York, in Rio, and in Seattle!

"I went back to the States in company with Jack, and I was with him the night his old boss walked in on him at dinner. This was the man who identified and buried him in Seattle. The poor man turned ash-white, but he did sit at the table. He sat down and ordered, and midway of the dinner he leaned over and felt Jack's jaw. Then he said very quietly, 'I've gone crazy,' and passed out on the floor. The last I heard, he was quietly but completely screwy.

"About a month before Pearl Harbor I was in Chicago and picked up the paper to see that Jack Freysling, the feature writer, had been killed in a South Side gun brawl between two gangs. Apparently he had been following up some story. I tried to get out of town before I saw him, but too many people knew I knew him, and I got roped in. I had to visit the morgue, and identify him. It was easy enough. His face never changed. Besides, they had those fingerprints.

"By some stroke of fate, his hearse

was smashed by a train en route to the graveyard. The coffin and everything else was smashed to bits. This time he was *really* through, and I was released from that haunting mystery. There might be some explanation, some trick, of a man reappearing after his supposed death if his body was intact. But this time his body had been chopped into a hundred pieces.

"Well, then there was Pearl Harbor, and all of a sudden we had more to worry about than our private lives. I was called up and shipped out to the Pacific pronto. I had been flying out there for about two months when I was transferred to the outfit we were all in. We flew over to join the row in the Solomons, and coming down on that field that first afternoon, I saw a big, wild redhead beside a hangar. Before I even got out of the plane, I knew it was Jack Freysling. It was, grinning and shouting, 'How's Chicago?'"

Bill Hay stopped and lighted a cigarette, and then looked around the circle of faces with an ironic grin. For a moment, he sat there chuckling softly before he said, "So you think the gremlins have got me? Well, boys, you'll find out. One of these fine days, you'll bump into Jack Freysling again!"

PERSONALLY, I agreed one hundred per cent with the gremlin part, but not the part about Jack Freysling. There is something uncomfortable about being with a crazy man, even if he's been a buddy and a friend, and after that, I kept pretty much out of Bill Hay's way. I recuperated and got back into action as an observer, and then we were knocked out. Our plane was badly hit, and we came wobbling into the home field. Just before landing, we went off on one wing and crashed. They got us out before we fried, but I was pretty well blistered up, and had the good luck to get shipped back to the States for discharge.

After a while I was able to get around. Broadway looked pretty good, believe

me, after those deserts and jungles. I had gone to a show one night, and stopped in at a restaurant afterward for a steak. I was just about to bite into the first mouthful when I heard that organ voice.

It was Jack Freysling, and he sat down grinning, and said, "This has got the Solomons licked a dozen ways!"

It was a kind of dull jolt, like the kind of blow that knocks your wind and senses out, but doesn't hurt.

After a long pause, I asked, "Are you alive?"

"As much as you," he grinned.

That was a heck of a thing for him to say, because it got me to thinking maybe I wasn't. Maybe this was some particular sort of Hades or something. And so I did what Bill Hay had claimed he did.

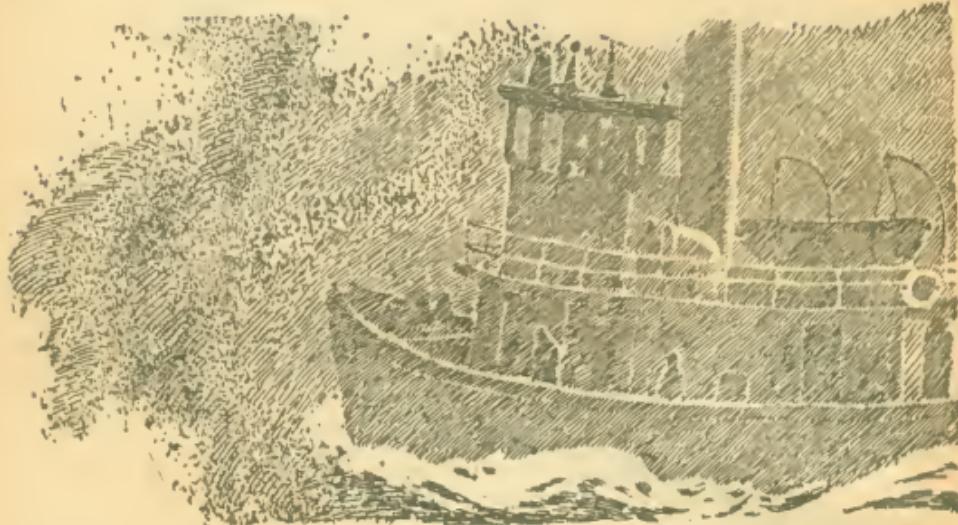
I stole Jack's fingerprints and checked them. I learned from the War Department that he had died in action, and from the New York police that he had committed suicide, and from the Rio authorities that he was buried there, and from the Seattle undertaker I got the location of his grave. He was also duly recorded as dead and buried in Chicago.

By a little hocus-pocus, and at considerable cost, I got those graves looked into. Excepting for the war, I am afraid I would be in a first-rate front page scandal. No remains were found in a single one of them.

So I have now settled down to the attitude Bill Hay took, and I can understand it now. It isn't possible, but it's true. Jack Freysling had died a number of times, but he is going to meet me, nevertheless, in twenty minutes for dinner, unless he has died again by then. He called up a while back to make the date. He said his little daughter was with him, and he had promised to show her a real battle ace.

I am going to take a very stiff drink, and then go and meet them. I am very curious about the daughter. This daughter is the one who died, also. • • •

Primeval Struggle Ruled the Thirteen Trapped



The Eternal NOW

A Novelet

By MURRAY LEINSTER

I

THERE was sunlight. There were colors. There were noises. They stood in a perfectly normal office, on a perfectly normal afternoon, in a perfectly normal world. A typist was at work in an adjoining room. There was a deep humming noise in the air, which was the city itself, vividly alive and in motion.

"And, Dr. Brett, this is my niece, Miss Hunt," Laura's uncle said comfortably. "I think she'll be inter—"

Harry Brett's hand closed on that of

the girl as she smiled at him. Her hand in his was very pleasant, and she was a very pretty girl. . . .

He felt an intolerable shock in every atom of his body. It was like a blow which hit him simultaneously all over, inside and out. He had a feeling of falling endlessly and a sensation of bitter cold. His eyes were closed, and he opened them, and then he sat upright with a gasp of amazement.

Brett was no longer standing in the

in the Nightmare World Where Time Stood Still



In the lantern's glow, they walked on the water

office of Burroughs and Lawson, in the Chanin Building on Forty-second Street. He was sitting down—reclining, rather—in what felt like a beach-chair. But it didn't look like a beach-chair. He was out-of-doors somewhere, but it didn't look like out-of-doors. He was in a city, but it looked like no city he had ever dreamed of. His first instinct was to think that he had died, somehow, and this was the vestibule of another world. The setting was appropriate for a quiet,

strange waiting-place beside the Styx.

Everything was gray, and everything was silent, and there were no shadows. After the first stunned, unbelieving instant, he saw that he was on a sort of terrace, as if outside a penthouse in a quite impossible universe. There was a thin dry mist everywhere, but nearby an angular structure soared skyward. It was gray, like everything else. It possessed rows of windows, but they appeared to be filed with an opaque gray

material instead of glass. Brett saw that building over a sort of hedge which resembled box-wood, but it was gray—and there were no shadows between the leaves. Close beside him there was a climbing plant which had gray leaves, and gray stalks, and gray flowers. There was, however, no fragrance in the air. There were no smells at all. The result was startling.

But the silence was enough to crack his ear-drums. He swallowed, and the noise in his own throat seemed thunderous. The buildings stood. That was all. No movement. No life. No sound! There was not even the normally unnoticed murmur of a breeze.

Dr. Brett pinched himself, and it hurt. He stirred speculatively, and the cushion rustled beneath him. He stood up, and his feet made noises on the gray stone beneath the chair. To himself he seemed to make a terrific clatter as he moved across the terrace to look incredulously over the edge.

BRETT'S sleeve brushed against one of the plants. There was the sound of ripping cloth. He was startled. In this noiseless gray twilight without shadows he could not credit what his eyes told him. He had torn his coat on a fragile shrub. He struck a match to see the plant more clearly. It shone out in the matchlight, a dark blue-green. It looked more than ever like box. It was! But he touched a leaf, and could not believe his senses. The leaf was immovable. It was as rigid as a stone wall. It was harder than iron. He could not bend it. When he pushed with all his strength he could feel no trace of yielding. When he touched the dirt under it, his fingers slid over the irregularities as if they had been glass.

He muttered incredulously and looked over the edge. The gray haze hid the ground beneath. It hid the sky. But he seemed to see dimly the outline of another building through it.

His match scorched his fingers. He blew it out and stared at them. The

flesh was the same dead-gray as everything else. It moved and wrinkled naturally, but it looked like gray marble. He struck a second match—and his hand was normal in color.

A thought hammered suddenly at the back of his head. "Mass-nullifier! Mass-nullifier!" Then he looked around him with his throat going dry as ashes. A horrible suspicion built up in his mind. It was something to make for insanity. Because he'd been working four years on a theory that mass was not an inherent, unchangeable property of matter. He'd proved it, but he'd come upon facts so dangerous and so deadly that he'd resolved to drop his experiments and destroy his apparatus. Yet this gray world about him was proof that someone else had made the same discovery.

He had a sensation as if ice water flowed in all his veins instead of blood. He was cold all over. This gray world, this immovable plant—it could be nothing else. And there could be but one man who would have wished to do this, and it was irrevocable. . . .

Then Brett heard a sound which was not of his own making. It was a gasp. He whirled, and made out a second beach-chair on the terrace. A gray figure stirred in it, and gasped again.

Dr. Harry Brett struck a third match. Its light showed color once more. The gray figure was a girl, Laura Hunt, with whom he had been shaking hands the instant before waking in this weird world.

"G-good heavens!" said the girl, staring in terror. "Where am I? What has happened?"

"I'm—not quite sure," said Brett unsteadily. "I'm trying not to believe my eyes. Haven't you any idea?"

He was not truthful. He did know where he was. When he was, at any rate. But it would be most merciful to keep her from knowing as long as possible.

"N-no." The girl's voice quavered. "There can't be any place like this!"

She hesitated. "Are we—dead?"

"Not yet," said Brett in an attempt at humor.

He crawled, internally, because of what he knew. He had put a live mouse, once, into the field of his mass-nullifier. He'd turned the machine on and off again, instantly. Where the mouse had been in its cage there was only a little heap of dust, with friable bits of unidentifiable bone and streaks of red rust. That had told him everything—why his first machines destroyed themselves by rusting until he plated them with chromium, what the removal of mass from an object meant, and the real significance of Einstein's formula for the mass and the time-rate of an object moving at the speed of light. Nobody had thought of the reverse of that formula, but he'd hit on it by accident when looking for something else. Now—

"We're not dead," he said, steadying his voice deliberately. "I feel quite natural. I think we'd better try to find out what has really happened. We were just being introduced when this thing started," he added. He spoke urgently because he saw a terror, close to hysteria, in the girl's eyes. "Your name is Hunt, isn't it?"

"Yes. Laura Hunt. And you are Harry Brett, some sort of scientist. Can you do anything?"

"I'm going to try," said Brett. But he was utterly without hope. "First I'll take a look around. Do you want to wait here?"

"I—" The girl looked around at the dead-gray, misty surroundings. "No! I'll come with you!"

The match burned out between his fingers again. She cried out.

"I look like a ghost," said Brett. "I know! So do you. Look at your hands." She gasped at the gray, stony color of her skin. He struck yet another match. Her hands looked natural again.

"It's the light," said Brett. "There's no color in this world."

"There's a colored light there," the girl said faintly.

FROM inside a gray doorway, across a gray room, down a gray hallway, came a subdued yellow glow. Brett's heart pounded. Hope would die hard, he knew. But there was only one man in the world who knew anything at all about Harry Brett's mass-nullifier. That was Professor Aldous Cable, who had been embittered by the necessity of accepting employment as Brett's assistant, and who hated him because Brett had achieved where he had not. There was no one else who could have brought this about, or wanted to do so.

"I don't suppose the light will come to us," said Brett: "I think we'd better go to it."

He tucked the girl's hand under his arm and moved toward the opening through which the light showed.

"I—really think I've gone crazy!" she said shakily. "This simply can't be!"

Harry Brett did not answer. They stepped through a doorway. They were no longer in the open air. But it was exactly as light, inside, as underneath the sky. The walls and ceiling and floor and furniture showed no shadows. The girl's hand had tightened with alarm. Everything was luminous—even the two of them! She caught her breath.

"Steady!" he said. "I'm just as scared as you are."

He was in a worse mental state so far as apprehension went. He knew what had happened. Einstein has postulated that there is an inherent relationship of mass and time-rate, so that if a material object—such as a space-ship—went at only slightly less than the speed of light, its mass would be almost infinite and, it would move out of normal time. What seemed a second to the space-navigators might seem a century or a millennium to the rest of the universe. But there was no question now of an increase of mass to near-infinity. The question was of its decrease to near-zero!

A flashlight lay on the floor beside the hallway. It was turned on, and its beam unwinkingly illuminated a room. Where the light struck, the room seemed com-

pletely normal. Rugs and furniture. There was a woman at a dressing-table, coloring her lips.

"I beg your pardon," gasped Laura Hunt. "Will you answer a question?"

The woman did not move. She was unnaturally still. She was motionless as a stone is motionless. Brett moved forward. He touched her shoulder. It was as immovable as a mountain. Sweat started out on his forehead.

"What is it?" asked the girl, shivering.

"It's what I was afraid of," said Brett grimly. "But this light shouldn't work, and it does. Let's see!"

He touched the flashlight. He picked it up. It was a perfectly ordinary flashlight with dry batteries inside.

"Maybe this is intended to make me hope," he said with a flash of bitterness. "The spirit may be of mockery but I am forced to accept facts. Come along!"

He swung the flashing beam about. Whenever it touched, the ghostly, glowing walls and floors looked normal. The rugs? Brett touched one with his foot. Each separate thread was iron-hard and iron-firm. He could not bend the most minute fibre. He grimaced.

"We're intended to hope—for a while," he said grimly. "Let's see what the rest of it is."

The girl clung to him as he moved down the hallway.

"You know what's happened?" she asked him.

"Now, yes," said Brett. "I was messin' around with a theory that mass mightn't be inherent in matter. Einstein says that an object could have infinite mass. The quantity of substance wouldn't change, but its mass could—and its time-rate. I wondered what would happen if you reduced an object's mass to near-zero. And I've found out."

They came to the open door of the apartment. The flashlight showed them elevator-doors. Harry Brett pushed his thumb against a call-button. It was immovable. He turned off the flashlight.

A flickering yellow glow showed in

the stair-well. On the next landing down, a highly commonplace candle burned smokily, stuck in the neck of a bottle.

"I see!" said Brett bitterly. "Cable's arranged this. It couldn't be anyone else. He was my assistant and helped in my experiments. I made a machine which would take the mass out of anything within its field. It was only part electrical, but it worked. I didn't like what I found out, though. Einstein says an object can have infinite mass and a time-rate which is nil."

CAUTIOUSLY they went down the steps. He leaned over the stair-rail and saw other yellow glows below them. Markers, evidently, to lead them to some intended destination.

"I found a way to make a mass almost nil," he told the girl. "Not quite nil, but almost. I found it implied a time-rate which was almost infinite! The obverse of Einstein's formula. If one made a space-ship—or a man—have almost zero mass, instead of one second to him or them meaning centuries or aeons of normal time—why—an aeon of his time would pass in a second of normal experience. That's what's happened to us. We're living perhaps a hundred million times as fast as normal. We could live here all our lives, and die of old age—and a clock in normal time wouldn't have clicked off a single second."

The girl stumbled. They passed another candle in a bottle. Harry held the flashlight before them and the separate steps were distinct.

"But how could it happen?"

"My assistant!" said Brett, bitterly. "Cable! He was jealous of the fact that I was getting results and he's never been able to do any really original research. When I found out what my machine would do, I stopped. It had possibilities that were too horrible to consider. I didn't think he knew them. But it's evident that he duplicated my machine on his own, and that we're here because he used his machine on us."

That's the only possibility I can think of, anyhow. Still, there are some oddities—"

He stopped. The girl shivered. They had reached the bottom of the stairwell. There was a respectable blaze of yellow light ahead. It came out of an open door and shone into an elaborate foyer and upon an absolutely rigid, absolutely motionless elevator-operator with a braided uniform. Brett clamped his jaw tightly and led the way toward the lighted door. It was most likely that he had been lured here to read a mocking message bidding him remember the heap of dust which had been the mouse

mitted Harry Brett coolly.

"Then find a way to get back," said Cable savagely. "I can't."

II

BRETT found there was almost a community of people in the duplex apartment which had an entrance behind the desk. Cable had been working desperately on his problem when Brett and Laura Hunt arrived. Now he led them to an inner door and, shaking with rage, flung open the door.

"Here he is," he cried savagely. "Tell him what to do."

Gadget Man

MURRAY LEINSTER is an author who particularly bears reprinting because he is old reliable himself—he almost never writes a bad story. Thus his earliest work compares favorably with his latest—unlike some top names who were hacking it out with the worst in the good old days.

The Leinster secret is simple: he always has an *idea*. He never throws together a purely synthetic formula of action and escape, a hodge-podge of character and incident, to call it a story. There is always a bit of a cerebral puzzle, a gadget, a gimmick, a new twist or new concept—and this makes good reading; then, now, and tomorrow. We think you'll find the mass-nullifier of THE ETERNAL NOW as interesting as we did. It's another example of the originality and solid science thinking that have made his stories favorites for twenty years.

—*The Editor*

of his experiment, and promising to watch for the imponderable remnant which, in normal time, would soon be Dr. Harry Brett.

He entered the door, prepared for any mockery. But he faced a desk, lighted by hundreds of candles in receptacles. He saw Professor Aldous Cable sitting at that desk, lean and dark, with heaps of hopeless calculations and diagrams before him.

"Hello," said Brett ironically. "Why did you bring us here?"

Cable ground his teeth. His features expressed at once hatred and horror. But rage overlaid all of it.

"You know where you are!" he said thickly.

"I can make a pretty good guess," ad-

He pushed Laura through. Brett followed quickly. The door closed. Professor Aldous Cable remained outside, his hands clenched.

The room was huge, and there was almost a dozen people in it. Four or five were men, mostly younger than Cable, and the balance were women of various types but tending toward the lean and intellectual. There was one girl of a lush, red-headed beauty, though. All of the people had one thing in common. Each had eyes which were filled with horror close to madness.

A record on a phonograph came to an end and stopped.

"Turn it on again, for heaven's sake!" someone said desperately.

A man put the needle back in its

groove. It began to grind out a senseless melody which had only one virtue, that of noise. At once Brett understood. By the looks of things these people had been here for a long while, corresponding to weeks. And this world was silent, and still, and changeless. Time had stopped. Motion had stopped. Human figures in the streets glowed faintly in the gray twilight. And these people were nearly mad with horror.

A young man with a twitching face came over to Brett. "You're B-Brett?" he stuttered. "Professor C-Cable said you'd get us out of this! Are you Dr. Brett?"

Brett nodded. The young man gulped.

"Then help us!" he cried shrilly. "We're all going crazy! Professor Cable is crazy already! We'll all go—mad."

Tension broke. A girl cried out. The cry went around the room. There was a rush, and Brett found them crowding about him, pawing at him, babbling at him. They were nerve-racked and trembling. They were stary-eyed and shivering. All of them appeared to be hysterical. Brett pushed Laura Hunt behind him.

"Stop it," he said sternly. "Hold everything—hold onto yourselves!"

But it had no effect. The babble grew to a clamor, a wild uproar. They pulled at Brett. They shrieked at him. They gibbered at him. He was the center of what seemed to be a mass nervous breakdown. It was deafening, inarticulate, terrible. Brett was shocked to see otherwise unharmed human beings so completely shattered by long-continued horror.

The door behind Brett opened again. The tall, lean, raging figure of Cable stalked in. For the moment he was not seen, but he quickly compelled attention.

"Quiet!" he roared.

Instantly the shrieking ceased. Save for the wheezy, senseless noise of the mechanical phonograph at the other end of the room, there was dead silence. These persons who had seemed so frenzied, cringed before Cable. They were

like people stricken dumb. Fearfully they moved back. But they looked even more fearfully from Brett to Cable and back again.

"Answer his questions," stormed Cable. "Tell him what he wants to know. Do whatever he tells you. But be quiet!"

He did not look at Brett. He went out of the door again and closed it behind him. There was a terrified hush. Brett felt a trembling hand upon his arm. It was Laura, wide-eyed and white. He covered her hand with his own.

"Steady!" he said in a low tone. "I didn't look for anything like this, but it's a darned sight better than I did look for."

He understood now, why he had been allowed to waken on that terrace out-of-doors, in a still unidentified apartment. Cable was frantic with rage because he had been forced to call upon Brett. He had wakened Brett high overhead, and led him down the long stair-well by lighted candles to mark the way, because it was intolerable to him to face Brett. By having Brett waken and find out for himself that he was in a world where time had stopped, he could avoid having to explain the facts that Brett was forced to discover.

Now, by thrusting him among these poor devils for further explanation, he could avoid otherwise necessary face-to-face talk with the man he envied, hated, and had robbed. He could have made the explanations ten times more clearly himself, but he hated Brett so vindictively that he must have someone else beg the aid that he needed, himself. So Brett must learn all necessary facts indirectly.

HE FACED the nerve-racked people sternly.

"Sit down!" he commanded. "I just got here. I know what all this is about, but I've got to find out what's happened in order to fix it. Sit down and answer some questions."

He could guess something from the types of the people before him. They

were the sort of persons who would flatter Professor Cable's vanity—and he had an enormous and insatiable vanity. Cable had been a brilliant student, and great things were prophesied for him. He'd been the youngest full professor of physics in America, for a time. But his reputation had never increased. He was a poor instructor because of his arrogant, contemptuous manner toward his pupils.

Professor Cable had contributed nothing in the way of original research except pretentious papers announcing enormously important discoveries which never quite checked up. In the end he'd been asked to resign his professorship because of an attempt to win recognition for an alleged discovery by blatant trickery. The fact was simply that he was not qualified for original and independent work, and his vanity would not allow him to admit it. But he was a capable man under direction and, as Brett's assistant, he had been useful enough. Now, though, Cable had certainly managed to mess things up!

"I suspect that most of you knew Professor Cable before this," said Brett. "A sort of coterie, eh?"

It was true. One trembling voice offered a fact, and another offered another. In minutes Brett had their part in the picture.

Because of his pretensions to enormous authority and prestige as a scientist, Cable had surrounded himself of evenings with an admiring group. He fed upon their admiration, and was galled by his subordinate position to Brett. Brett's success with the mass-nullifier research had filled him with raging envy because he could not claim it for himself. And when Brett ruefully decided that his results were too dangerous to be published, Cable had no reason to be discreet.

He boasted to his admirers of the mass-nullifier, as if it were his own discovery. He painted a picture of a journey in a time-field, when as the field operated the world seemed to stop dead

in all its affairs, the light of the sun slowed so that its yellow glare faded to deep red and went out, and a man would see briefly by slowed-up X-rays, and then later by the ghostly light of cosmic rays themselves. As the time-rate went up and up, Cable had said, there would come at last a ghostly gray light which would be that of the infinitely short vibrations which are gravitation. And he pictured such a journey as possible in the machine he told them he had devised.

One of his admirers quoted Wells' "The Time Accelerator," and spoke of the opportunity such a device would offer to criminals. Cable explained, tolerantly, saying a person in such a monstrously accelerated time-rate could easily see objects which moved too fast for ordinary perception. A bullet in mid-flight would seem stationary, to him. Even a lightning-flash would seem the most deliberate of motions. But his own efforts would be too brief to affect any objects still remaining in a normal time-rate. Nothing which moved more slowly than miles per second would seem to him to stir.

For him to thrust at a thread with all his strength would be an application of force for such an infinitesimal fraction of a second that he could not stir it enough for him to see its motion. He could not raise it to a speed of miles per second—stated in normal time—with a thrust which—again in normal time—might last only for millionths or billionths of a second. And of course he couldn't steal anything or kill anyone.

"Unless," Cable had explained, "he took another machine with him and brought the thing he wanted to steal or the man he wanted to kill into his own fast time-rate."

Then he started. The phrase was a flash of pure perception. It was probably the most brilliant thought Cable ever had in his life. He'd already made a mass-nullifier of his own. It worked, as he knew, because it converted the energy of mass into the energy of time-

speed. He had not tried it, but he was confident that it would work better than any Dr. Harry Brett had made because of an "improvement" he had made in the design. Now, having caught at this new inspiration, he embodied a second mass-nullifier. He got into the field of the first machine, carrying the second. He turned on the first. The light of the sun turned red and died. Ultimately he saw a dull-gray mist twilight, which was the earth's gravitational field, changed into light by the incredible time-rate to which he had attained.

THE fawning, nerve-racked folk told all this to Harry Brett in the great living room in which they were camped like looters. They could not explain much more, but he could fill additional details for himself.

Cable had used the second machine. He had been able, of course, to march through the utterly soundless city, and when he coiled the machine's field-cable about an object in normal time—an object he could not possibly stir—and threw the switch, that object came into accelerated time, and he could do as he pleased with it. He opened doors and entered banks and jewelry shops. He gathered himself a king's ransom in portable but stolen wealth. Yet he was inherently a fool. He needed admiration. Having gathered riches, he craved applause.

He found one member of his coterie, seemingly frozen and certainly immobile like the rest of the world. He encircled her with the field-cable—it was the lushly beautiful red-head—and brought her to consciousness in the world of gray twilight. Her name was Ruth Jones. She was a girl cub reporter. Maybe Cable had some idea of getting publicity through her story. But the girl instantly became hysterical with terror. She clung to him, however, because he was alive in a world which was like a nightmare of death. He was not afraid—he was a fool—and her terror made him feel strong and admirable.

He found others of his usual circle of admirers. They wakened to find themselves in this world of no time, this world of an eternal now. They were terrified, but they followed him docilely because only he could take them back to the normal world.

For days he exulted in his strange position. He was lord of the treasures of the Earth. There was no single object upon the globe that he could not take if he wished. He was master of the lives of those he had brought here. Food? There was food in plenty all about, but it was gray and faintly luminous unless a light from a high-time-rate light shone upon it. And even then it was utterly unreachable. It could not be moved or taken or eaten. Even water could not be drunk unless Cable used his mass-nullifier to turn it to liquid. His victims could not defy him. They could only fawn upon him for life and the means of living.

"He must have had a swell time," said Harry Brett grimly. "The man's crazy with vanity. But you left something out. There's a great deal of jewelry around."

There was. Even the men had jewelry wherever jewelry could be put. They look uneasily at each other. But Dr. Harry Brett was now their only hope. So they told him that Cable had, on occasion, grandly distributed largesse. He was master of the treasures of the world. He let them help themselves to wealth. Every one had a small fortune in gems or paper money hidden away in their clothing. But they would give it all, they babbled fearfully, to see sunlight once more and to hear noises that other people made. . . .

"No doubt," said Brett. "But why can't he take you back?"

Voices lowered. They looked fearfully at the door. At long last, they said, Cable had consented to return them to the normal world. They had all trooped within the field-cable of his original machine. They were rich, but even then they were nervous and jumpy. When-

ever Cable scowled at them, they were filled with panic. Finally he had taken his own place among them and thrown the switch!

Nothing had happened. Nothing had ever happened. He'd worked feverishly, even frenziedly, and a dozen times they'd got within the field-cable's circuit, but they could not return to normal time. They were marooned in this world in which time did not pass, this world in which it was eternally now.

That had been a long time ago. A terribly long time ago. The machine would only work to bring things from normal time-rate into this world, but it could put nothing back!

"He made the machine and got himself here, and got you here, and then couldn't get back," said Brett ironically. "Rather stupid, eh? So at last he had to bring me here! And I happened to be shaking hands with a girl, and he couldn't speed up the time-rate on one of us alone, so he brought us both. The man's a fool!"

The door opened again. The lean dark figure of Cable appeared. His eyes blazed. It was plain that he had listened to every word. His followers cringed. He was trembling with rage.

"You think I'm a fool, eh?" he rasped. "Very well. Come on and get to work! I'm the boss this time. You're working for me. You'll make that machine work or I'll have these people roast you over a slow fire until you do. They'll do it if I order them to."

Brett saw stark panic intensified in the eyes of Cable's victimized admirers. To be abandoned by Cable meant a death of horror to them. If Brett failed, they would obey any order he gave. Brett shrugged again.

"Naturally, I'm going to try to make the machine work," he said scornfully. "I want to get Miss Hunt back to normal time, and these poor devils too. But I doubt if you intend for me to join them."

"Right!" said Cable, grimly. "You are quite right. I don't. Come get to work."

III

PROFESSOR CABLE, Dr. Harry Brett and Laura Hunt walked along a street which was like a nightmare. It was recognizably Park Avenue, but only because of the iron-railed grass plots in the center. Their footsteps echoed hollowly upon the pavements. They passed frozen gray shapes on the sidewalk—once a man alone, startlingly perfect as a sculpture in gray stone, but horrible because he was not stone at all. At a little distance he was terrifying because there were no shadows anywhere about him. As he was left behind he appeared to merge into the mist as if withdrawing from substance to become a wraith again. Once they passed a stout woman and a child. Then three young girls together, with trimly-shaped legs—and no shadows.

There were cars in the roadway, too, and they seemed to be mere convolutions of the mist, until one drew near. Then they were sardonic mockeries. It seemed as if all this world of gray mist were some gigantic mockery. Fog formed into stone as one drew near, and reverted into fog as one went on.

But the gray shapes were not stone, but human beings petrified in time. And the definite fact that this was Park Avenue was ironic, too, because these humans were faintly luminous, the mist was luminous, and the feeling was that of walking in the maliciously amused dream of a dreary, silent demon. All appeared to be unreal because of the lack of shadows. All appeared ghastly because everything glowed of its own light. Everything reeked of a stilly gray horror because of the deathly silence.

Professor Cable turned off Park Avenue and led Brett and Laura along a twisting route they could not identify. They did not speak. Cable still seemed to be filled with fury. To a man of his rabid vanity, who had demonstrated that he was a fool, the unforgiveable insult was to call him a fool before his victims.

He turned, suddenly, and led the way up two low steps, turned again, up two flights of stairs, and unlocked a heavy door. He struck a match and lighted candles. As their light grew, the room's interior changed from a featureless gray cavern to a rather musty small workshop. It might have been the shop of a model-maker or someone who constructed specially designed bits of hand-made jewelry. There was a sturdy safe in one corner. On a workbench by a foot-power lathe and drill, there were various metal parts.

"Here's where I've worked," rasped Cable. "I've built two extra nullifiers, from beginning to end, because I couldn't find anything wrong with the ones I had. But they work no better."

He brought his hand out of his pocket. It held a squat pistol.

"I'm going to lock you in here," he announced savagely. "The window is barred. I'll bring you food. You can't break down the door. I've made everything ready for you. There's one of the nullifiers. It will bring things to our time-rate, but it won't send them back to normal. Find out what's the matter."

Brett looked at the familiar object on the bench. It wasn't chromium-plated, as he'd made them, but that should make no difference. Cable's device was merely a small brass case with a control-switch on it—Brett's models had had the switch at the end of a small flexible cord—and a length of flexible field-cable. Inside the case there would merely be a very simple electronic circuit—without tubes, however—a pair of condensers, and two oddly-shaped bits of metal which actually generated the nullifying field and which determined the direction in which the field operated. Very little energy was required, astonishly little. Brett suspected that this machine actually simply produced a condition in which the static energy of mass converted itself into the kinetic energy of time-velocity. But now he only glanced at the nullifier.

"Find out what's the matter and then

you'll kill me," he said drily. "Of course Two men mustn't know how to make these things. It's too dangerous. But I'm going to try to kill you too, Cable. I mention it because you don't dare kill me, yet."

Cable snarled savagely as he backed out of the door, his weapon held ready. The heavy door closed. The lock clicked. Then the door thumped as two heavy bars went across it top and bottom.

Brett picked up one of the candles and held it to the window.

"Barred, all right," he said to Laura Hunt. "I think I can depend on him, too, to have made sure I can't cut through the walls or floor, even if I can put them in a time-rate where it's practical to try. Let's look at this nullifier."

BRITT sat down at the work-bench and carefully opened the brass case containing the electronic circuit. He looked almost cursorily within. He pursed his lips and whistled soundlessly. Laura Hunt moistened her lips.

"What's going to happen?" she asked. "I still feel as if this were a dream, a terrible nightmare."

"It's worse than that," said Brett. "And if Cable gets back to normal time with a nullifier that will work both ways, it's going to be worse still. He'll be able to abduct any girl or murder any man on earth, and leave no trace. With his mania for superiority my guess is that he'd wind up trying to terrorize the world into accepting him as—heaven knows what! Emperor, maybe."

"He couldn't!"

"He could make a good try," said Brett grimly. "There's one trick he could pull which would come close to destroying cities. In fact, he could literally wreck a nation. I hope he doesn't think of it."

Then he said "*Mmmh!*" He was looking in the case of the nullifier. Deliberately he put the cover back on. He looked at a rack of little-used tools over the work-bench. He glanced beneath at a row of flasks of such chemicals as a

man doing much soldering and perhaps a little electro-plating would have in his shop. He swung the field-cable around them and threw the switch. Then he worked with them for half an hour, arranging an odd combination of chemicals in one of the flasks. Once he paused and picked up a scrap of paper, looked at it, and put it in his pocket.

He set the flask aside, picked up the nullifier, and removed the switch from the case. With a curiously rueful expression on his face, he spliced on a section of flexible lampcord and connected the switch on the end of that. He checked connections and turned to the girl.

"Would you stand there a moment, Laura?" he asked casually.

She moved to the spot he indicated, her eyes questioning. Then, quite suddenly, he vanished from her sight. She started violently.

"Sorry, I didn't think," he said suddenly, from behind her. "This thing works."

"What do you mean?"

"You stepped in the field and I turned on the machine," he told her. "You went back to normal time, frozen, immovable, like everything in normal time. Then I brought you back."

"No! I hadn't any sensation of that," she answered him anxiously.

"You weren't in normal time long enough to have any sensations," said Brett curtly. He was obscurely busy with the nullifier. He seemed almost to be wrestling with the cable.

"Can we return to the normal world, then?" asked Laura desperately. "Can we go before he comes back?"

"You were back," said Brett. "And I brought you here again. So could he. I'll send you back when I can make you safe, but I won't turn that lunatic loose with a really good mass-nullifier! I've got to jump him—"

There was clattering of the bars of the door. Laura caught her breath. Brett moved like lightning. He spilled liquid from one of the flasks onto his

handkerchief. The pungent reek of ammonia came into the room. He thrust the cloth into her hand. Swiftly he leaned closer to speak into her ear.

"Cable was listening all the time through the door," he whispered. "Hold this over your nose. Be ready to rush."

The bars rang loudly as they clattered to the adamantine floor, outside. The key turned. Brett picked up the flask in which he had arranged chemicals with such care. He shook it and held his thumb as a stopper over its neck.

The door swung wide and Cable stood in the opening. He seemed to tremble with triumphant hate. His weapon bore on Harry Brett.

"So you'll jump me, eh?" he raged. "You've fixed a nullifier, so you'll jump me, eh? But now—"

The flask in Brett's hand made a tiny hissing noise. His thumb was white from the pressure with which he held it down. Now he released it. There was a tiny, indescribable sound and a jet of faintly greenish-yellow vapor shot out. It struck Cable's face. Instantly his features contorted with agony. He flung himself backward. His pistol went off with a noise which sounded like the crack of doom in the awful stillness of the city.

"Come on," said Brett in a strained voice. "Cover—your face!"

HE SEIZED Laura's hand. He thrust her past Cable who was twisting and choking. He pushed her forcibly down the hallway. The pistol roared again, and it seemed that the explosion would crack their ear-drums. Then for a third time the gun thundered.

Brett's body jolted from the impact of a bullet. But he shoved Laura to the stairway and ran after her down the steps. They clattered on while horrible noises came from above.

"Chlorine," panted Brett. "I figured he'd be listening outside the door. That's why he left you with me—so I'd talk. The ammonia protected you, and I held my breath. Too bad the gas kept me

really from jumping him."

They reached the ground-level. They raced for the open air. They fled into the gray mist. The pistol roared from a window over their heads. But Cable was strangling even as he tried desperately to kill them. The chlorine gas that Harry Brett had made from sal-ammoniac—for soldering—and the sulphuric acid used for cleaning small castings, must have caused his lungs to feel as if they were on fire. It was unlikely that he had got more than a whiff of the strangling stuff, but he would not breathe easily for an hour or more. This was the reason Cable had missed Brett and Laura with the revolver, and continued to miss them, though he fired at them desperately until his pistol was empty.

Brett led Laura this way and that until it was quite hopeless for anyone to try to follow them. Then he stopped. He was a gray, featureless figure in the world of gray mist. Laura was another. He pulled a flashlight from his pocket and turned it on himself. Instantly he was flesh and blood again.

"He nicked me with one of his bullets," he told her grimly. "I couldn't stop before, but I'm bleeding a little. Take this handkerchief and bind it up, will you, Laura?"

He was bleeding a great deal, but by tying the bandage tight around his arm, she managed to staunch the flow of blood. Then she stood still biting her lips.

"You need a doctor for that," she said.

"We'll manage," said Brett. "I don't think the bullet hit a bone. It's going to hurt presently, though."

They were somewhere in the middle of a wide expanse of clear asphalt. The silence was awful. It was such stillness as no human being every normally experiences. Not only the people and the subways and the traffic were still, but the breeze was still. Not even pigeons fluttered above the streets. There were not even insects. There was no sound at all.

"I suppose he's got the machine you fixed," Laura said. "Now he'll go back to normal time and leave us here to die!"

"That's what he thinks," said Brett, grinning. "But—look!"

Brett then showed the girl the object he had carried away from Cable's workshop, concealed beneath his coat, with the heavy rubber-covered wires strapped around his waist. It was the Time Nullifier.

"Let's see if the Professor can laugh that off," said Brett.

IV

FOLOWED by the girl, Brett led the way along a crosstown street until they came to the docks. The water below them was motionless in smooth ripples. It resembled glass. Brett tossed a coin from his pocket, and when it fell on the water, it bounced and rang loudly.

"We don't need to worry about a ferry or a bridge," he observed. "The river's frozen more solidly than it ever could be frozen by cold."

They explored a great warehouse. In the watchman's office they found a lantern. Brett produced his nullifier and brought the lantern into accelerated time. The lighted lantern gave the interior of the office an appearance of reality, and its rays disclosed a watchman's lunch-box. Brett looped the field-cable about that, too, and turned the switch. There was a thermos flask of coffee, and sandwiches. Laura devoured one hungrily.

"I'm beginning to have hope," she admitted. "If that wound of yours isn't too bad, we may be able to make out all right."

"I'll do," said Harry Brett.

But the wound was painful. Horribly painful. The bullet had gone through the muscle just below Brett's elbow, and had possibly glanced off a bone. It had not broken the arm, but Brett had lost a great deal of blood. He began to feel the injury as the numbing effects of the

shock started to wear off.

They found a ladder leading down to the water. They descended, and, with a lighted lantern between them, started to walk across the Hudson River. Brett knew Cable had not the slightest chance of finding them, once they had taken refuge in the warren of houses on the New Jersey side of the river. But they found their surroundings weird to the extreme. As the mist closed in behind them, there was no object of any sort to give the impression of a material world. The lantern made the surface of the water look normal, and appear impossible to walk upon. They seemed to be suspended above a gulf of liquid into which they ought to sink. The rest of the universe was gray mist.

They walked, and walked, and walked, over the slippery frozen waves. After a long time Harry Brett found himself wobbling from weakness caused by the loss of blood. The hot coffee had helped, but he had been badly weakened.

"I thought that we could keep in a straight line by noticing the—ripples," he said with an effort. "They'd give us a direction since we can't see anything. But now we are lost."

Laura slipped her hand under his arm. It sent a stab of pain through him. He gasped. She put her arm about his waist and sturdily strove to help him that way. She did bear up a great deal of his weight. But they went on endlessly.

"Stop and rest," he panted presently. "Listen! If we can't find shore, together, you take the nullifier and go on. Sooner or later you'll reach land. If you—have to go, don't try to find me again. No hope of that. Just find some hiding-place. Some place Cable and his gang would never think of searching. Slum, maybe. Put the cable in a circle—stand inside—and throw the switch. If they don't find you, you'll be all right. You'll be back in normal time. Cable's trouble was that he didn't realize that the design of the nullifier-case was part of the apparatus. Its shape helped form the

field. When he—put a switch on the case instead of on a cord he changed the capacity constants. With the extension-cord and the switch on the end, it is the way I designed it . . ."

"I won't leave you!" cried Laura fiercely. "Maybe I can help!"

The lantern slipped from her grasp. It fell to the solidified surface underfoot. It cast queer shadows.

"Hold it," said Brett sharply. "Look! The shadows. That's the—wake of a boat! If we follow it, we can get on board."

The possibility seemed to put new strength in both of them. They struggled for fifty yards more. For a hundred. The frozen eddies of the wake grew larger and more turbulent. Then they saw the boat which had made the froth. It was a gray shape upon gray water in a gray mist. It looked rather like something carved out of ice. It looked unspeakably desolate.

But when the rays of the lantern shone upon it, it lost its appearance of ghostliness and changed back to honest planks and solid untidiness. They saw its name, "Sarah J. Loomis, N. Y."

BRETT found the task of making the last few yards to its side doubly difficult. The otherwise mirror-smooth surface of the river was here heaved up into great, rounded, glassy mounds, over which they slid horribly. But at long last they reached the side of the tug, and Brett put out the last remnant of his strength, and Laura pushed his bulk desperately. He reached the deck.

The door of the cabin was open and Laura dragged Brett inside. Laura tremblingly adjusted the field-cable about a bunk. Its blankets and mattresses ceased to be frozen and immovable, and became soft and inviting. She helped Brett to the mattress. He almost collapsed upon it.

"Now," said Laura resolutely. "I'm going to see what I can do for you."

She left the lantern burning in the cabin. She went away with a flashlight

and the nullifier. In twenty minutes or so she came back with water. Hot water. And towels. And antiseptic.

"I'm an expert with the nullifier now," she said cheerfully. "And on a boat they have everything. There's an oil stove, and the machine made it work, and water in a tank, and food in an ice-box. I opened that. When I've re-bandaged that wound of yours, I'll fix something to eat."

They stayed on the tug for a period of which there could be no measure, of course, but which must have been equivalent to days. Laura was tireless in helping Brett. At first he grew feverish and horribly weak. He repeated his instructions to her in case anything should go wrong.

"But after all, Harry, with the nullifier as you've fixed it, we can both return to normal time," she said anxiously. "We're not likely to be found here."

Brett shook his head grimly.

"My life's not important enough to be saved that way. Listen, my dear! Cable is so vain he's almost a maniac. Now that he's trapped in this—this eternal now, he's apt to go literally crazy from disappointment. Do you realize what he could do!"

Laura nodded, her features pinched.

"He could abduct people, as he did those poor friends of his," she said. "But if you have to have a doctor, and can't help matters, I don't see why you should bother."

"That's not the point," Brett told her. "It's a matter of radio-activity. Radium has a half-period of about two thousand years. Uranium's is infinitely longer, five times ten to the ninth—five billion years. Suppose Cable wanted to get even with the normal world in which he never cut a figure? Suppose he brought radium into accelerated time? What would happen? It's always three degrees hotter than its surroundings. It's always giving off heat. Suppose its time-rate were accelerated so that its half-period became a fraction of a second of normal time?"

"There's not much radium," Laura said faintly.

"Not much would be needed for damage. Figure the result if radium were brought into this time. To us, it would simply become deadly to handle. But in the normal world, if it took a full second to disintegrate, its temperature would go up to about three billion degrees, and iron turns to steam at three thousand. It would be literally one million times hotter than necessary to vaporize iron. Metal, stone, and even bricks would turn into incandescent vapor, which would give off cosmic and X-rays fierce enough to burn and maim for heaven knows how far, and would expand or explode with a violence beside which TNT would be a zephyr. But I think," added Brett grimly, "that our time-rate is faster than that. I don't think it would take a whole second for radium to destroy itself and everything around it."

Laura shivered.

"Or he could use uranium," said Brett more sternly still. "It might not seem as bad. But where there are milligrams of radium there are tons of uranium to be had. If he brought a mass of it into our time it might not create an explosion in normal time. It might disintegrate at what would seem to be a leisurely rate. It might take a year to destroy itself. But even a milligram of radium is nothing to play with, and this would be two thousand times as deadly. Do you know how much a milligram is?"

"If you crush three aspirin tablets and divide the powder into thousand parts, each part will be a milligram. A milligram of speeded-up uranium would make a nearly incurable burn in a fifth of a second, and there could be tons of it! If Cable put masses of that stuff about New York, nobody could approach it. No metal shield could stop its rays. Its radiation would make the very air radio-active, so that a hundred miles away you might breathe in poison which would sear your lungs. The same radiation would sterilize human beings whom

it did not kill, and milder doses still would cause mutations or human monsters if babies were unlucky enough to be born!"

Laura twisted her hands apprehensively.

"I see," she said slowly. "You can't risk that!"

"No, I can't! And once I return to normal time, I can never come back to this instant unless I'm dragged back. If I stay in normal time a single second—how many years of this time would that amount to? I have to stay here and fight Cable!" Then Brett's face became stern and implacable. "I'm stronger now. I'll be up—well—we'll call it tomorrow. I've designed a new nullifier which will take you and itself back into normal time, and then fight any other nullifier that tries to bring you back here. Get back to normal time with one of those around you, and you'll stay."

He did get up the next day, though there had been no faintest change in the gray silence about the motionless tug-boat. He found a workbench down in the engine-room and worked there, with what metals and tools he found and brought into accelerated time. The members of the crew came to be familiar, standing like the naturally painted statues the Greeks were so fond of. Once, as he worked, he grinned and turned to Laura.

"I feel like I know these men," he said drily. "They've been standing around so long. It's funny that they'll never know me. I hope some day to pay them back for what we're doing to them."

"Doing to them?" asked Laura, puzzled.

"We're robbing them," said Brett ruefully. "We have to. And they're going to be very badly puzzled. For instance, there's the stove. You've brought it into our time. The cook in the galley had merely turned his back to it. When, in normal time, he turns back to it—why—it will have been rusting in this time for several centuries. It will seem to him

to have fallen into a heap of rust while he looked the other way. The bunks we've rested on—we had to make the blankets and mattresses soft—won't have blankets or mattresses when they look at them. There'll be only a little fine dust there. The ice-box will be simply a pile of rust-scales and cobweb, and what food we don't use will be simply a fine powder so long decayed it will have no odor at all. I hope to pay for this damage, but it's going to bother them. And I do hate to spoil these tools, but I need them!"

He was making two miniature nullifiers. When they were finished he tested them, and then carefully added the devices which would automatically counteract the field of any other nullifier which essayed to bring them into accelerated time.

Six meals later—as good a way of measuring time as any—he had altered the larger nullifier in the same way. He had Laura put one of the miniatures on herself. Only the cable showed, and it was not conspicuous. She could reach the tiny switch with ease.

"Now we invade New York," he told her. "As soon as we get ashore, Laura, and on solid ground, you go down into a subway station or into a phone booth somewhere, and go back to normal time. Now Cable can't bring you back to this time-rate, even if he finds you. I'll go on and attend to him!"

But Laura smiled and shook her head in refusal. They were in the cabin of the tug. "No," she said.

"My dear!" demanded Brett. "What else do you propose?"

"Why, I'm going to stay with you!" said Laura fiercely. "After I've known you this long, and nursed you when you were hurt, do you think I'd desert you when you were going into danger?"

Brett tried to frown at her, and failed.

"I didn't think you'd be so obstinate," he admitted. "Hmm. You're safe, though. Throw that little switch and you go back to normal time and neither Cable nor I or anybody else can drag

you back. So you can—escape me if you like. But I'm trying to guess what you'll do if I—kiss you."

He moved close to her. He touched her shoulder lightly, smiling down at her. She swayed toward him a little, her eyes shining.

Time really stood still before they separated.

"Now, I wonder why I didn't guess that, either," he said. "Come along, girl! We've got to wind up Cable so we can run down to the City Hall—in normal time, my dear—and attend to some business."

They left the tug behind them. They moved through the mist toward the New York shore. At long last they found it, and made their way up from the river's surface. Brett's first idea of finding a place to work in Jersey City had been altered by the discovery of the tug. It had turned out to be a lucky accident as he had been able to use tools in the machine-shop which he might not otherwise have chanced upon.

"First we must go to that building on Park Avenue where Cable hangs out and learn what's happened," Brett said to Laura when they reached the street level. "We must also see what's happened to his friends."

L AURA looked puzzled. "But how do you know which building on Park Avenue it was, Harry?"

"The address was on a doormat at the bottom of the stair-well. I was using a flashlight freely then, you may remember. A swank apartment house. No name. Just an address."

He threw a flashlight on a street-sign so that the numerals would show out through the gray luminosity of all objects. Then they knew where they were. They walked briskly. Harry Brett now had in his pocket a revolver which he had found on the tug, and Laura was more adequately protected, but insensibly the atmosphere of gloom and of horror affected them. The blank-windowed, shadowless buildings, and the mist, and

the silence. Especially the silence!

"I'm frightened!" said Laura, under her breath, presently.

"We're there," said Brett in a low tone. "This is the door."

They went cautiously within the gray, glowing cave which had now the appearance of the foyer they had last seen lighted by candlelight. Now there was nothing. But they heard a noise. Somewhere, a woman was sobbing hysterically. It was a low-pitched, throaty gasping which grew higher and higher until her throat seemed to close. Then there was silence, and then it began again and went on, monotonous and uncontrollable. There was despair in those sobs, and horror, and something like mounting insanity.

Harry Brett switched on his flashlight. It shone through the open inner door and illuminated the figure of the lushly beautiful red-haired girl, Ruth, the girl reporter. She was bound cunningly in a chair so that she could not move hand or foot. With the beam focused upon her, she seemed the only real object in a world of unsubstantial dream-stuff. Her eyes were wide and fixed. Her features were drawn into the ultimate expression of horror. She sobbed again.

When the flashlight fell upon her, she shrieked. And instantly from all about her there burst a bedlam of cries and sobs. It was sheer pandemonium, the inarticulate outcry of a dozen voices. Harry Brett's flashlight swept from side to side. He saw the rest of Cable's coterie. All of them were wrapped in ropes until they were like cocoons. Only their heads emerged. Their faces now almost were the faces of mad men and women. They cried out at Brett, screaming at him, cursing him hoarsely, gasping at him, or else pleading in voices which would have melted a stone.

Laura shrank close to the young scientist. The unholy tumult made his flesh crawl. He shivered. Then he turned his flashlight on himself.

There was a sudden, stark, incredu-

lous silence. Then the tumult broke out again. But its tone was utterly different, if no less desperate.

His fingers shaking with a sick rage, Brett struck a match. There were candles everywhere. They were not burned out. They had been extinguished only after these poor folk were rendered helpless, so that they would have only the gray twilight about them and so that they would see each other as gray and unhuman images—and so that they would go mad with the horror of their situation. Cable had left them here to suffer, as punishment for having witnessed his humiliation at his own and Brett's hands.

Brett set to work to free the nearest prisoner. When the first victim could complete his own release, Brett went on to the next. The red-headed girl fainted dead away as she tried to arise from the chair in which she had been bound. Laura lighted more candles until the room was once more ablaze with light. Toward the end of the task of releasing them, Brett spoke to them jerkily.

"I've found a way to return you to normal time," he told them grimly. "It's permanent. Cable will never be able to drag you back to this time again. But I need some help. He can do enormous damage if he isn't caught. Who'll help me catch him?"

But these men were half-crazed and utterly broken by the terror they had been through. They babbled hysterically, ignoring the call for volunteers. They only pleaded desperately to be returned to the normal world again.

In the end Brett bunched them all in the middle of the room, crowding them as closely as possible. He put the fieldable of the modified nullifier—modified at the tugboat's work-bench—around them so they would all be within its influence. Its action could not be reversed—not until they were in normal time, or until they reversed it themselves. But by the time they had taken one breath in normal time, every object or living thing left in accelerated time

would have turned to dust or crumbling oxide.

"Now listen!" said Brett savagely. "There's something you've got to do as soon as you get back. You want to get out of this building, of course. You may have trouble explaining how you got into it." He looked them over, and they were too nerve-racked to be moved by anything but terror of the Eternal Now. "But," went on Brett, "though Cable's device can't bring you back out of normal time, because centuries will have elapsed here before you finish drawing a breath, this machine could. Therefore, as soon as you're back, smash it! Stamp on it! Batter it flat! Wreck it! Don't neglect to do what I tell you."

They babbled desperate promises, and they were in such awful terror of return that they probably would obey his orders.

Then Brett pressed the button of the switch.

V

A DEAD silence ensued. After the babbling, it was as abrupt as a blow. The motley group was frozen in the midst of gestures and sobs and nerve-racked grimaces. They had been returned to a normal time-rate, and they could not be drawn back to this time-rate by Cable's present instrument. Brett had an instant's weary amusement over the thought that they would never admire any other scientist. The red-haired girl, Ruth, would be so hysterical in her aversion even to the memory of this experience that it was unlikely that she would ever write any news account of it. But there were still important details to be wound up.

"Cable's still loose," said Brett bitterly. "He must have thought that you and I went off to hide somewhere and use the machine I'd repaired. He thinks we're back in normal time ourselves. So he avenged himself on the people who'd seen him defeated, and he'll try to get even with the world for his own despair.

Perhaps he is hunting for us. If he thinks of bringing radium or uranium to this time-rate, it would wreck the world."

"What are you going to do?" asked Laura.

"Find him!" said Brett, more savagely still. "I'm going to take you to the office where we were being introduced when all this began. I'm going to see you back in normal time, and then I'll hunt up Cable. If I ever find him, I'll come back to normal time. If I don't find him, I hate to think what it'll mean."

"Do you suppose he could be at that little workshop?" Laura asked.

"We'll see first," said Brett. "I picked up a letterhead on the workbench. Maybe it's the address."

It was. They went through the gray mist and the dreadful city. They located the doorway, two steps up, climbed stairs, and found the door which would open, and the bars which could convert the workshop into a prison. There Brett made a light and bitterly regarded what he found. He pointed to the scrapings of rubber insulation and to bits of clipped-off wire.

"There's proof that I'm a fool," he said savagely. "He knew I'd solve the problem of returning things to normal time. He heard me tell you so. So when we got away and he failed to kill us, he looked at the scraps where I'd worked. Oh, how dumb I was! He found bits of wire and insulation. He knew I'd added a flexible control to his nullifier, and it could only have been to restore the switch to its original place in the design! So he's tried it in his turn!"

A savage fury filled Brett. It was like a furious remorse, because if Cable could return to normal time, now, he could make more nullifiers and enter a new ghostly world at any time to commit inconceivable crimes with impunity. In the last analysis this would be Brett's fault, because he had first devised the mass-nullifying apparatus.

Brett groaned. Then Laura caught his arm.

"Harry! What's that?"

There was a sound in the dead city outside; an actual sound in the clamorous stillness. It was a humming sound, faint at first.

"Good grief!" said Brett. "A car!" He listened incredulously. "That's it! He figures we're back in normal time. Now he can go back when he pleases! So he's punished everybody who saw him licked, and—you see? He'll load up a car with loot and drive it somewhere out of New York, most likely. He'll return to normal time a hundred—two hundred miles away! I've got to get him now! You're all right! Go to your uncle's office and throw that switch."

Brett threw the last words over his shoulder as he plunged out of the workshop in which first he, and then Cable by studying the evidence of the work he'd done, had solved the problem of leaving the world where time stood still. He raced through the gray mist, dodging the ghostly motionless figures which were people.

The noise of the car grew louder, died down, and grew louder still. Brett knew, of course, the logical place for Cable to go. To the place where he had left his victims, because they had gathered riches for themselves. It would be literally the one place where he could add most of his loot with the least trouble. And of course, to a man with the maniacal vanity of Cable, there would be the added attraction of proving to them their own exceeding stupidity and his wisdom....

BRITT halted short of his destination, his jaws taut and the revolver from the tugboat out and ready in his hand. He waited grimly. The car stopped. He heard Cable get out, invisible in the mist. He heard the car-door slam. Habit is so strong that, although believing himself the only living person at large on an entire planet in the Eternal Now time, Cable had closed the car door behind him. He marched into the building. Brett saw the dim, yellowish glow of

his flashlight. Savagely Brett moved forward.

To cut off Cable's escape, Brett went first to the car. He opened the door and fumbled for the ignition-key. It was gone. Habit had made Cable take it, before getting out of the car. Brett used his own flash to make sure. Yes, the key was gone. But the back was loaded with loot—and there was a nullifier on the front seat! Cable had been using it to gather his loot, but here and here alone he would not need it.

Brett took the nullifier away from the car. He knotted its field-cable over his shoulder. Then he heard a sound from inside the building. He could picture it in detail—Cable stunned to see candle-light flooding the foyer once more when he had left his victims in the gray twilight alone, Cable creeping cautiously to see where his prisoners had been left to go mad in hopelessness, to find the ropes strewn on the floor and the men and women in unmistakable stasis, in iron-hand immobility, returned to normal time-rate; and then Cable frenziedly trying to work the nullifier he could see so plainly with its field-cable encircling the group. He could not stir it, of course. Brett heard him cry out in his rage. He almost bellowed. Brett heard him curse horribly.

Then, an instant later, he came running and raging out of the street door. It is most likely that he meant to get his own nullifier from the car, to fetch back his victims one by one and wreak upon them an insane vengeance for outwitting him. The point at which vanity merges into insanity is hard to find. The only offense anyone had committed against Cable was the discovery that he was a fool, but that offense had driven him to maniacal cruelty!

"Hold it!" snapped Brett coldly, from the mist. "Put up your hands!"

Cable gasped. Then he roared in crazy wrath. The gray mist was split by gun-flashes. An automatic pistol roared itself empty. Cable swerved in his running and rushed toward Brett's voice.

Brett fired. Cable stopped short. He had come to have an implicit belief that only he possessed weapons. Brett fired again, though not to wound.

"You're going to drop that gun," said Brett harshly, "and put up your hands!"

Cable screamed with impotent rage. It was unearthly to hear such a cry from human lips. It echoed and reechoed from all the tall towers hidden in the twilight. Then Cable turned and plunged for the car. Brett fired yet again. Glass tinkled from a car-window.

"I only need an excuse to kill you," raged Brett. "Stop!"

The car-starter whirred. The motor caught. Cable must have moved like an uncannily precise automaton in the midst of all his passion, to have put in the key and turned it without fumbling. Gears clashed. The car roared into motion. Brett ran toward it. It rolled away.

He emptied his revolver after it, but it vanished in the mist. It turned a corner. He heard its brakes squeal, and then it roared on, and turned again. He heard its sound go away and away, headed north on one of the wide north-and-south avenues.

Even a man in a passion of outraged vanity and terror could thread the motionless traffic. The car turned west. If it reached the Hudson Drive, it could go on for hundreds of miles, and pursuit would be useless and discovery impossible. And if Cable did not miss the nullifier from beside him—and with all the interior of the car a shadowless gray luminosity he was not likely to—he might go on and on until his gasoline went low and he needed more. Then he would seek out a tank-truck, or another car from which he could siphon fuel. In either case he would need the mass-nullifier to make the gasoline a liquid. And then he would discover that he had no nullifier.

Brett felt sick. But then he heard Laura calling desperately in the gray silence.

"Harry! Harry!"

He moved toward her.

"I'm all right," he said unsteadily..

"You heard the shots?"

"Did he shoot you?"

"No, but he's dead," Brett lied quickly. "Don't come here."

HE WENT quickly toward the sound of her voice. She appeared in the mist. She clung to him.

"I was afraid you'd been killed," she sobbed.

Brett kissed her and firmly led her away.

"We're going to your uncle's office," he said evenly. "We'll turn the switches of our two nullifiers there."

Then he stopped suddenly. He slipped Cable's nullifier from his shoulder and put it on the ground. He crushed it under his heel. He stamped it into uselessness, into a merely cryptic mass of battered metal. Then he fumbled at the next corner and dropped it into a street-drainage opening. It was in accelerated time, and if it should ever be found in normal time it would be after thousands of millions of years of its own time-rate's rusting. It would be merely a lump of oxide, which no one would think of examining.

He led the way on again. He was haunted by the knowledge of what was bound to happen somewhere a hundred or two hundred miles away, in this time-rate. Cable would discover that his nullifier was gone. He would have a car, almost out of gasoline, and probably millions of dollars in money and gems. But he would have no food or water, and there would not be one drop of water or one morsel of food anywhere on earth that he could use.

He might find his way into towns, and into groceries and fruit-markets, and feel food and drink beneath his fingers. He might cast a light upon it and look at it. But he could not stir it. He might try hopelessly to walk back to New York, because there might be crumbs remaining where he had left his victims to die. But he would never make it. Some-

where, sometime, stumbling through a gray mist, he would fall from weakness and not be able to rise again . . . And—well—in normal time someone might notice a little heap of dust and a few fragments of rotted bone, but it would not be conspicuous. Nobody would notice a hopelessly oxidized watch or other trinket, so far gone in rust as not to be recognizable. . . .

Brett hoped Laura hadn't heard the car in flight. If she ever mentioned it, he would try to persuade her that she was mistaken. Because there was absolutely nothing that could be done now. Nothing whatever.

"I pick your uncle's office to go back to normal time in, because we'll make less fuss turning up there than anywhere else," he said, in an attempt at a conversational tone. "When Cable's friends turn up, in a state of nervous collapse, in somebody's drawing-room, it is going to make talk. But what we want is to go quietly down to the City Hall and get married."

She stopped, and he kissed her.

"And then, I've something to do. I've a new line to work out on those mass-nullifiers."

"No!" she said fearfully. "Once we're back in normal time, you mustn't ever touch one again."

"This will be different," he told her. "While I was laid up on the tug, I figured out a way to regulate the amount of mass one would take out of a substance. I think I can put a thing in any time-rate I want. And radium or uranium would be deadly at a time-rate approaching infinity, like ours, but if we could choose a half-period of five hundred years, or one hundred, why, that would be power! Atomic power! There'd be no reason to worry about the exhaustion of coal and oil, then."

She stopped again. Again he kissed her.

"And I'd like to make some money," he told her humbly, "because I want to give you things. Also I think I ought to pay for the damage Cable did with the

nullifiers I invented. That will run into pretty big sums. And I'd like to put up a monument to him. Poor devil! He threw away his life trying to be a great man. But if he's responsible for my solving the problem of atomic power, why not a monument to him?"

They went on. They went into the office of Laura's uncle in the Chanin Building. Laura laughed shakily.

They stood as they had been. Days and weeks ago—or maybe it was the thousandth of the thousandth of a second—Laura's uncle had said, "And Mr. Brett, this is my niece, Miss Hunt." And they'd shaken hands, and as their hands were clasped, everything had begun . . .

Now they clasped hands again, smiling at each other.

"Contact!" said Harry.

They threw over the switches of the two irreversible nullifiers at the same instant . . .

There was sunlight. There were colors. There were noises. There were smells in the air. The world was alive around them. They stood in a perfectly normal office, on a perfectly normal aft-

ernoon, in a perfectly normal world. A typist was at work in an adjoining office. An elevator-door clicked. There was a deep humming noise in the air, which was the city itself, vividly alive and in motion.

"My niece, Miss Hunt," said Laura's uncle, comfortably. "I think she'll be inter—"

He stopped and gasped. Because his niece—a very well-behaved young woman—walked straight into the arms of the young man to whom she had just been introduced—whom she had first laid eyes on not more than a minute before. She clung to him, and put up her face to be kissed, and caught her breath in something suspiciously like a sob of joy.

"Harry!"

Dr. Harry Brett kissed her hungrily and then spoke with an air of extreme earnestness and satisfaction.

"We'd better hurry," he said. "Come on! The marriage license bureau closes at four o'clock. We don't want to be late!"

MYSTERY OF THE METEORITES

FROM the misty dawn of history and probably before, Man has puzzled over the meteorite, that awesome visitor from Outer Space. In ancient times, primitive tribesmen feared and sometimes worshipped it. Indians, living around the great meteoric crater of Canyon Diablo near Winslow, Arizona, still shun the desolate region tabooed by their medicine-men as the "Place where the Great Spirit came from the Sky in a blazing fire and buried himself in the Earth." Modern scientists, gathering iron fragments from the vast crater where millions of tons of meteoric material fell an estimated 5000 years ago, stated that none of the far-flung cosmic debris of the mighty explosion had ever been tampered with by the Indians.

The theory of meteorite worship advanced by some writers finds substantiation in the discovery of archaeologists excavating a Montezuman ruin near Chihuahua in Mexico. In an elaborate tomb, suitable for the burial place of a great chief, they found only a 3400 pound chunk of meteoric iron wrapped carefully in mummy cloth. The cloth was of, fine texture and the method of wrapping the same as employed in the burial of a person of noble blood. This meteorite is now in the United States National Museum in Washington.

The massive 36 ton Ahnighito Meteorite, on display at New York's Hayden Planetarium, was considered by the Eskimos of Cape York, Greenland, as a direct visitation from the realm of the fearsome Sky Gods. Unlike the timid Arizona Indians, these hardy hunters traveled hundreds of miles just to obtain metal from the meteorite with which to tip their harpoons, spears and arrows. Yet, curiously, the Eskimos appeared genuinely relieved when their mysterious celestial visitor was placed aboard a schooner by white explorers for transportation to the United States. One grizzled old shaman who, single-handed, had killed a polar bear, frankly admitted his fear of the huge "Devil Rock." If the white men dared risk the awful wrath of Sarka, the Devil, by lugging the rock away to Kabloona-land, they were welcome to it!

So far, at least, Sarka has withheld his vengeance upon the bold Kabloonas.

—Norman B. Wiltsey

COSMIC ENCORES

(Continued from page 6)

If the speed of light is cracked, however, Dr. Struve finds it encouraging to think about thousands of planets in space upon which life forms very similar to our own might thrive.

Thus, not leaping or bounding, but by slow and hesitant steps does orthodox science follow science fiction.

Of course we have heard it argued that there is no reason to question the theory that a highly advanced race might not have already solved the problem of speeds faster than light. And to this no one can give a definite no. But the evidence is not yet entirely in. Meanwhile, as we write this, new reports on flying saucers continue to come in. And whatever they are they serve this important function: they have made the man in the street think about science fiction as he never has before.

LETTERS FROM OUR READERS

ONCE upon a time FSM had no letter department (sigh). Nobody wrote in. What happened? Everybody and his uncle write in now. And everybody argues all the time and calls names. Dreadful.

NORMAL SHNORMAL

by Thomas O. Toloman

Dear Mr. Mines: I am prompted to write in regard to your somewhat acid repy to Mr. Gregg Calkins' letter in the September issue. Mr. Calkins, apparently fortified with considerable insight into various fields of science, claims that we cannot call the present abnormal because there is no normalcy. He is, of course, correct in the strict sense of the meaning of the term. You, on the other hand, claim that the norm temperatures of the interglacial periods are a suitable normal by which we may fix the "abnormality" of the glacial periods; and of the present. The purpose of this missive is to correct a few possible misconceptions which might arise from your "argument."

First, there was no norm temperature twixt the glacial ages. Each glacial age and each interglacial age had its own norm, but between the three there was no similarity. The last one, for example was pretty chilly, while the first slightly less so, and the middle one rather hot.

Secondly, none of the interglacial ages enjoyed an age of 250,000,000 years. The first one (Aftonian) lasted about 150,000 years, the second (Yarmouth) about 250,000 years, and the third only 75,000 years.

Taking certain geologic facts into consideration, and granting that we may for the sake of the skeptics call them only approximations, we know that life became existant upon this planet about 500,000,000 years ago at the beginning of the Cambrian Period. This period constitutes only one fourth of

recognized geologic time. Therefore, may we not say that the present is abnormal because there is life in existence?

Again, may we not say that it is abnormal because man is in existence? After all, man has been here for only a little less than 1 million years, and out of the 2,000,000,000 years that old Terra has been around, that is a drop in the bucket.

And so, I would like to suggest that Mr. Calkins is, of necessity, correct. Even in the most broad sense there is no normalcy except change. When things cease to change, then we will have abnormality. You can have normals within certain boundaries only after you have established the artificial norm, and then who is to say which is actually normal and which is the variant? This pertains only to such astronomical entities as earth, of course. We can easily establish a norm for such short-lived entities as a single animal, or possibly for a species, but then we were discussing a planet, were we not? A planet somewhat over 2 billion years old at that.

If you have bothered to read this far, I want to thank you for your attention to a somewhat opposition viewpoint. The only authority I can claim for my statements is to be found in numerous books on the subject of Historical Geology of which I am both a student and an instructor.—505 East 16th Street, Georgetown, Texas.

All we know is that the single book we read said 250,000,000 years, which is quite a bit different from 250,000 years—the *longest* of your three periods. We hereby appoint Gregg Calkins a committee of one to look up and check the facts on these ice ages, he being younger and considerably more vigorous than we. Besides, he might have a chance to be right and it would be another first for Calkins. Anyway, thanks to you, Mr. Toloman for going to the trouble of trying to straighten things out. After you've been a fan for awhile you'll know better.

NOTHING SACRED

by Don Archibald

Dear Sir: I have been a random reader of science fiction for the past 20 years and have finally summoned up enough nerve to make a comment.

Having observed that between 75 and 100 per cent of "letters to the editor" are criticisms of said person and his magazine. I would hate to be out of step with that tradition. So employing the license of beefers, grippers and people with bad livers all over the world—I have a bone to pick with you.

The story SECOND CHANCE in the September issue is the best in many respects I've encountered thus far. In theme and punch it is in my opinion, a top bit of writing. However—comes the beef. At a crucial point in the story Kubilius-Pratt pulled a red-hot boner.

Old Man Pythagoras has probably rolled over in his grave and added three or four more deci-

mal places to the value of pi, if he's found out that someone has called a side of an equilateral triangle the "hypotenuse of his right-angled triangle."

A mistake like that in elementary math can make an otherwise good story smell like a long dead, two headed, four armed man from Jupiter.

For my money, when dealing with the cosmos you can get as loose with the facts as the intergalactic security police will permit, but please keep the well-known facts straight.

Was well pleased with the other short stories in the same issue. A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER was a good story, except that I couldn't figure out how the Kyrian, right after the initial crash landing on Earth carried his several thousand ton space ship to the volcano. Or perhaps he brought the mountain to the space ship. So long and give my regards to the Venusians.—*43½ Pilon Street, Hull, Que.*

Math was always our weak subject in school and I'm not sure right now how many sides a triangle has. But it do seem to me that an equilateral triangle wouldn't have a hypotenuse, so you may be right. However, it shouldn't spoil the story for you; it is obvious the authors meant a side of the triangle, no more. So . . . unless we hear to the contrary from our Mr. Pratt, a hand-carved Martian vveryk to you for your sharp-eyed spotting of the moot point.

ANNULMENT

by Marion Smith

Dear Mr. Mines: Just finished reading Mr. Don Allgeier's letter in the September issue. I'd hate like KERT to be married to him! Or maybe I should say "I'd hate like HADES to be married to him," since he is so darn far behind the times, at least in his reading. Think he has a case of "everybody's-erazy-but-me."—*El Paso, Texas.*

Dreadful disease, that last. I just wonder if everybody way down in the secret recesses of his mind doesn't wonder about that though. The things we do seem so straightforward and honest and logical, while other people—well, don't they do the craziest things?

BACKWARD O TIME

by Raymond H. Forbes

Dear Mr. Mines: I have purchased and enjoyed very much, the Fall issue of your magazine. It comes as a surprise to me that you have printed SLAN, since I missed that number, living in an isolated area. I've always wanted to read the much-praised SLAN—can I still buy a copy of the Summer issue? I'm anxious to know so I can get the novel at long last and at a reasonable price. (\$10 for a copy—it can't be *that* good! Not if Null-A was any sample!) I think you have an excellent magazine and

wish to join the ranks of those who clamor for the return of the Gernsback classics. Can you get hold of the VIA MARS series by Gordon A. Giles? I mean all of them. And maybe publish the whole set in one issue?

There is something puzzling me which maybe you can clear up for me. In the old days a magazine cover was (a) good (2) illustrated the feature story (c) depicted weird, extra-terrestrial or ultra-dimensional landscapes, machinery or weird creatures.

Since about 1942, sf covers are like all other covers in that they are entirely lacking in imagination and also that they almost without exception depict a naked woman being rescued from a fate worse than death. The intrepid hero is always armed with a proton blaster and a pair of athletic supporters.

In view of this regression to an adolescent characteristic quite as disillusioning as the much-mentioned "naivete" of the old-time stories, how is it possible for sf on the level of the mass-man, to continue paying lip-service to the gospel of eternal progress of the "onward and upward" ad astra per aspera type? It would seem that though some think science fiction is better than in the old days, the illustrations, with few exceptions, certainly are not. Not mentioning any particular mags, for they almost all sin in this respect at least once in a while. Some of the so-called "leading" mags, although they do not deluge us with the naked cuties found on cheap pulps, have gone hog-wild in the other direction and give us a steady stream of disembodied, transparent heads floating over whirling electrons, vaguely similar to the outmoded model of the Bohr atom. All of which is childishly symbolic though, no doubt, meant to be very profound and loaded with significance.

I wish somebody would tip off such fools, (artists and editors alike) or else stop hiring them. Gad, what wouldn't I give to see a good old Dold illustration, a Howard Brown cover, a corny Frank R. Paul painting, or even, perish forbid, a Wessel!—*122 Riverside Park, Iowa City, Iowa.*

Any time you want to see a Brown or Paul in the original flesh, drop up to the office—we've got a stack of them. And we admit to being a conservative old curmudgeon, but we do think that Coggins and Schonburg are way ahead of the old boys—put down that blaster!

But to your questions: We don't stock back numbers. Maybe someone who has an extra copy will come to your rescue with the Summer issue bearing SLAN. We have printed two of the VIA MARS series, and very likely will use some of the others in due time.

To your passionate and well-expressed views on cover scenes there is not much one might say. True there is more epidermis on covers than there used to be, but there is a large increase in realism, in technique and craftsmanship, there is a considerable variety in subject whereas all the old covers looked alike. This is not to say present covers are perfect—not at all.

They are in a state of flux, continually changing. They have changed markedly in the past year. Keep looking and you'll see.

CHANGE OF HEART by Charles Baird

Dear Mr. Mines: Yesterday I purchased the November issue of FSM. I must change my mind. Happily I do so. When the September issue appeared I was one of the most emphatic panners of the new circular design.

However, I realize now that I was influenced by the painting. Frankly I thought it terrible. On the other hand, Bergey's painting is vividly realistic, it has magnificent depth which is foreign to most sf paintings. As soon as I saw this cover a term popped into being. I thinks it fits. So for what it's worth I christen the FSM circle painting Porthole on the Future.

So, Sam, keep up your mags to their present calibre and you'll remain on top.

How about a lot more Farmer?—161 Albemarle St., Springfield, Mass.

Honest confession is good for the soul, they tell me, and a man who admits a change of mind in public is quite a guy. The story on that Emsh painting for September was mostly one of loss in printing. The original cover was very good and very effective. Otherwise we wouldn't have bought it. But no one could foresee the almost complete loss of detail which ensued in the printing and the general muddying up. Now by contrast, the Bergey job didn't look as good in the original as the Emsh, but it reproduced a lot better. So you can't always tell.

Thanks for the slogan—Porthole on the Future is a nice touch. More Farmer? Catch Thrilling Wonder Stories for February and Startling for February: should be a poem in SS and a novelet called Mother in TWS—strong stuff.

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW by Calvin Thos. Beck

Dear Sammywell: I can't say if Hank Kuttner's MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER is the best thing you could find out of your files of oldies, but it surely never had the fine illos of Finlay to go along with it, as per this instance. That man, Finlay, is no longer a necessity in sfantasy mags—he's a definite asset and valuable part of any 'zine today.

And now I look into the rest of the contents, and sigh: "Sigh!" Is it not possible to keep at least one of your 'zines aside only for reprint material? No doubt you selected a roundelay of very fine shorts for your Sept. FSM, but please keep 'em either for TWS, SS, or your new (and hope very successful) SPACE—Oh, Lester, is

you dere, man??!! Yep, a very original (?) title. Somehow Mr. Webster's book seems to shrink when it comes to the choosing of nouns and superlatives as the titles of sfantasy mags. But not wishing to get off the subject too much . . .

As I said, your shorts (hope they're not too tight, ol' man!) are excellent in FSM, particularly in the Sept. ish, and was glad to see Ray Cummings in a semi-comeback with a very fine yarn. Sometimes I wonder where all the good veteran old timers of STFiction go to. Which reminds me that a couple of real seasoned and expert men in the business should deserve a comeback via reprint form, but most specially with new stories. Bring back: Otto Binder, Jack Williamson, Ed Hamilton, Van Vogt (could produce another "Slan"?), just to name a few.

Just learned that the omnipotently ever present Will Jenkins (also known as Murray Leinster, Wm. Fitzgerald and Henry Kuttner) is also known under the famous by-line of William P. McGivern. This is almost as complicated as if it turned out that Howard Browne was Rog Phillips. Although we all know that Browne is none other than Sam Merwin's older brother Manuel.

Rumor has it that Pat Poulton is in reality the left hand of Virgil Finlay. Sometimes some of Schomburg's interiors look like they got cut out of a comic book. Are Emsh and Emsler one man? They have identical styles and nearly identical names. Anyhoo, Emsh can take care of a good cover, but he be Emsh or Emsler on the interiors he's just *Uwooghh!* as well as *Oooccegghh!*

Don Alleger's letter has a good suggestion anent your reprint schedules. Don't know if I pointed it out before, but you could set a liberal quota on your stories that would accomplish the original purpose of FSM by bringing stories of the "old days" to new readers. Say a fifteen year limit on all stories reprinted. There was quite a bit of junk—not overwhelming in proportion but enuff—during Gernsback's very early days, so it wouldn't take you long before you brought to life most of the cream-of-the-crop of those days. Then after having established a fifteen year or so quota on what you reprint, the rest should be a cinch since each year that passes will only build up that much more of a back-log of old TWS and SS yarns for yer files. It's impossible to accomplish your purpose if you hop around from the early to the late Thirties and the early Forties, and back and around again. See?

Bouquets to you for putting FSM on a bimonthly basis. You keep on putting them out, and I'll keep on buying 'em.—84-16 Elmhurst Ave., Elmhurst 73, L. I., N. Y.

Will Jenkins is not only all the people you mention but also Leigh Brackett, Margaret St. Clair and Judy Merrill, not to mention Katherine McLean, Willy Ley, L. Sprague de Camp and Gregg Calkins. There is also a rumor that he is Bea Mahaffey, but I personally consider this an exaggeration.

Emsh and Emsler are one. And regarding his interior illos, you haven't seen all his techniques yet. Wait a bit.

Regarding those "cream-of-the-crop" Gernsbacks; if you only knew how much reading and picking and rejecting has to be done before, with many groans of agony, the inevitable least of many evils is selected! So far we have roamed the field, picking a likely story wherever we encounter it, with no particular chronology in mind. We are inclined to doubt we could just go back a specified number of years and take the stories in order—they just don't stand up that well. But orchids to you for the suggestion, they are always helpful and they always exert an influence on our thinking.

KEEPING COMPLAINTS DOWN

by David Feese

Dear Mr. Mines: Hey! What's this story, THE GODS HATE KANSAS, coming up in the next ish? I'm a red-blooded Kansan and I don't see what they could possibly have against Kansas! Well, maybe I had better wait until I read the story before I pass any opinions . . . but this had better be good!

But now to the September ish. This is what I call the perfect issue. All the stories were good with the exception of A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER which was excellent! Just keep coming up with reprints like this and I'll be satisfied as I'm sure your many other readers will be also.

I want to congratulate you on the way you are handling your mags (reprints in FSM, space opera in SPACE STORIES and the cerebral type of story in SS and TWS.) (I borrowed this last from the Reader Speaks in the Oct. TWS.) I should think this would keep all complaints down on that matter.

About the cover—I like it, I like it! Thanks for a wonderful magazine.—*Reed Barber Shop, 4606 E. Central, Wichita, Kansas.*

Dunno about Kansas, never having been there, but isn't it a wonderful title? Sticks in your mind and what editor could ask more? The posies lead to much egoboo, if you don't mind my borrowing fan terminology for a moment; merely another way of saying I am overwhelmed by your extravagant appreciation. Don't cut yourself, we need you.

THE EYES OF TEXAS

by Bobby G. Warner

Dear Ed: So you're getting on the old ball at last, eh? Going to give us FSM six, in lieu of four, times each year, eh? Going to give us superb covers like the Emsh one on the September issue, eh? Ahah! and what is more, you're trying to stuff some GOOD stuff like SLAN, and more recently, A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER down our Exeno—(Excuse me; that's Xeno) lined throats, eh?

Say, who do you think you are? The super-editor? If so, you're not far from wrong.

Looking back to the first few issues of FSM (then FSQ), I can see a drastic difference. In your favor, that is. FSM has come a l-o-n-g way in a little over two years. Better paper on the cover and interior; better cover artists; better material (much better!); a longer COSMIC ENCORES—just BETTER, dang it, in every way.

There is one slight gripe? In the September issue you gave us one novel, six shorts, but no novelet. Now that ain't fair to us novelet-lovers. It should have been one novel, one novelet and four or five shorts. That would have made a slam-bam, jim-dandy issue.

Anyone interested in buying (plug) the first three issues of SCIENCE WONDER STORIES in good to mint condition? I have 'em.

I must go. But I'll be avidly awaiting the November issue of FSM, Sam. I know you won't disappoint me by putting out a lousy issue. (You wouldn't dare!)—*Post Office Box 63, Bessmay, Texas,*

Just can't help ourselves, thassall. Of course, this is the first time we've been called a "super" anything, except what our wife calls us, but it's nice to hear. So as a special favor to you, we'll go on cramming those terrific stories and superb covers down your peristaltic throat. Oh yes, as to novelets, we sure like to get one in—if we get one in! Get it? If it doesn't get in, how can we get it—oh, well we'll try to get one in the next issue.

ONE PERCENT CREAM

by Dick Clarkson

Dear Sam: Y'know, the last time I read one of your FANTASTIC STORY MAGAZINES was about two years or more. Then it was called QUARTERLY. Well, since the change of name I haven't so much as touched one of your mags till now. So this being my first letter to FSM, I figured I'd try and see what comes out of this typewriter towards your new—to me—proxine.

You must keep FSM in the background. I knew, o'course, of the change in format for TWS and SS, but I never once thought that FSM would do the same. Trouble is, I'm still trying to see whether or not I like it. It sure is novel . . . that I'll give you. Looks nothing like your old FSQ's. But while all this fanfare for TWS and SS has been going on, I've heard no mumblings, however faint, about FSM.

And I don't like that. I find that—in thisish, anyhow—that your stories are better, in comparison, than either of the current TWS or SS, your companion mags. The novel was the best I've ever read in sometime . . . it would have to be a reprint. Which just goes to show that the old ones had something the new ones don't . . . or don't have as often, at any rate. The shorts are good, solid reading; some better than others, but all good. That surprised me too. It's just as if it were a new mag to me, having been away from it for so long.

But I've been thinking . . . everyone, even myself, thinks that the old stories are better than the

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new ones. I'll say that I often—in fact, very close to always—I get a bigger bang out of a 1942 novel by, well, say Kuttner, than I do out of another novel by him in 1952. The old stuff has always held me better. But, now, I wonder. . . . there have been better than 25 years of s-f behind us. In that time, there must naturally have been dozens of really terrific stories.

Now, today we have the usual selection of authors and stories, some of them really hot. But the reprint mags have the choice of better than 25 years to go by. So you can pick the cream of the crop of over 25 years and compare it to a novel written only eight months ago. Naturally, the old one would win, except in the case of that recent one's turning out to be a masterpiece.

So when I pick up a FSM, with the top novels of 25 years printed, I wonder why I say that the old stuff is better than the new? You have to remember that beside the few that are fit for reprinting, there are hundreds that would never be accepted today, and have been forgotten. The old stuff we read nowadays is the absolute best of over 25 years of s-f endeavor; how can we hope that today each and every story written will measure up to the standards of "Slan" or "The World of A," or any other such great, no matter who may have written it? You forget, you fellas who say that the old stuff is best, that a mere 1% or so of the old stuff is what you're reading, and that is the best 1% of all of it that was written between 1925 and today. The cream off the top.

I have no doubt that in ten years there will be some stories written today that will be considered classics, and reprinted time after time. "Pebble in the Sky", in my opinion, will be one of those. So in ten years, they will again be reading the best of what we had today, and all the other hundreds of stories which are NOT classics will have been forgotten, just as we today have forgotten all those which were not classics that were written before. Sure . . . in a comparison of the old stuff we read in reprints and the new stuff coming out, the classics will naturally win out. You can't possibly expect every author to make every story he writes into a classic on a parallel with the cream of 25 years! It's impossible! Here you are, raving over the best of 25 years' effort (with justice though), and then comparing these masterpieces with every new story that comes out. You can't do that! What do you want? That every story written from now on will be a classic is obviously silly. And it's unfair to today's authors.

So that's how I feel, Sam. The other 99% of the old stuff is no better than what we get today. And that 99% will never get reprinted. It's not that good. And it's the same today.

I'll stop now. I hope this sees print, since I can't possibly condone all this raving that really has nothing back of it. I've presented my arguments, now. The defense rests, yer honor.—410 Kensington Rd., Baltimore, 29, Md.

You've got a point there. Some of the faithful comrades we've run into argued that way: they'd bring up every good point they could think of in Uncle Joe's regime and compare it with every bad point they could dig up about

Uncle Sam's system. This is loading the dice. The fair argument, naturally, would have been to compare the good with the good and the bad with the bad, but who fights fair?

To an extent this has been done in talking about science-fiction reprints, but it seems to me that there is also a die-hard rear-guard which insists that everything written in the old days was better than anything written today. If this were only true we could pick stories for FSM blindfolded instead of reading as much as we do. We have a quarrel with your final statistic too, about 99% of the old stuff being no better than the new. No better also means no worse and for that our seconds will be calling on you shortly. Seltzer bottles at ten paces. . . ?

THAT MAN AGAIN by Page Brownton

Dear Editor: I am 12 years old and this is the first letter I have written to your magazines. I have read only two Captain Future stories but I like them. Why not reprint one in FSM once in while? And why doesn't somebody publish an anthology of Captain Future stories? I hope no one has ever thought of these questions before, but I have no way of knowing.—1619 Collingwood Ave., San Jose, Cal.

Somebody has—us. We have thought of doing a Cap Future anthology and on the basis of the best information we could get, decided that not enough readers would be interested. There are quite a few who love Cap Future and they are determined and articulate (good and loud) but we need large numbers to make a magazine possible. So up to now it doesn't look too likely. Sorry.

WATER UNDER THE BRIDGES by Henry Moskowitz

Mines Dear Sam: Never let it be said that editors aren't human—youself included. I can imagine how you felt when it was decided to up FSM's schedule. So what happens? You jump the gun. On the cover and spine you marked the latest issue of FSM September 1952. That's wrong—it was the Fall 1952 issue. Next time rein back, boy.

The cover wasn't too good. Too much dark against a yellow background. I like the new cover format.

I can take two or three new stories but not six. FSM is a reprint mag. So let's have reprints of short stories and novelets, huh?

A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER was very good. How you could compare WELL OF THE WORLDS with this is beyond me. WOTW was science-fantasy, while AMYTC was straight science-fiction. Say, how about getting Kuttner to [Turn page]

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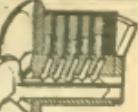
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do a sort-of-sequel using Arda, Scipio, and Li Yang?

The best short story was Don Wilcox's ORPHAN OF SPACE.

I became immune to Calkins—or was it von Seibel? Well, now I have to repeat the process again.

My pal Nancy. If she wants *She* I think there were some in FFM or FNM.

When I turned to page 141 I thought, "How could Sam have put my name down as Jack?" When I turned to page 143 everything was solved.

Did I ever hear of a writer editing in his spare time? No.—*Three Bridges, New Jersey*

We're human? Can you say that, Hank, after your visits to this annex of bedlam? Thought we detected a look of panic on your impassive features the last time you braved the icy stare of the receptionist. (We keep her in the deep-freeze overnight.)

Good news for you—a letter just this morning from Hank Kuttner hints that he is stirring himself and thinking of writing again. Nobody could touch Hank when he was hitting his stride. And I've got a feeling he'll be doing stuff with a fuller maturity than his best in the old days.

XENO ANYBODY?

by Kent Corey

Dear Mr. Mines: You have some of the best editorials in the business but they aren't as good as Sarge Saturn! The old Sarge was more friendly, (corny but friendly). Anyone care to write to me?

A lot of people would not only like to write you, but probably to send you bombs. So why not put your address on your letter?

ORIGIN OF SPECIES

by Joe Semenovich

Dear Sam: It all depends on the reader's taste, and his mind. I'm talking about the debate, is old sf better than new sf. Let me give you an example. Twenty years ago, Joe Schmoltz was an avid sf fan. He bought every single Munsey and Gernsback he could lay his hands on. Then one day, while he crossed the street, he got hit by a Ford. He was killed, or anyway, the doctors thought him dead. They buried him.

Twenty years later, Joe Schmoltz wakes up from the dead, and in an assumed disguise, lives on earth again as an average person. Since sf was his favorite type of reading, he goes and buys himself an sf mag. Hurriedly, he rushes home, seats himself, and begins reading the lead novel. Ten pages later, he drops it because he doesn't like it. He starts on a novelette; two pages later, he drops it because he doesn't like it. Being an sf fan, he thinks, oh well, this was a bad issue, and he goes and buys himself another sf mag. The same thing

happens all over again. Why? Because he thinks differently than a present day fan. His reading taste is different. Probably, he doesn't enjoy any of the present day novels—because all of them, are different.

But now lets say that Joe Schmoltz didn't get hit by a Ford when he crossed the street. Say, he got to the other side safely. And that he kept on reading sf up today, and he'll keep on reading science-fiction until he dies. He enjoys the present day sf. In fact, he likes it much better than the old Gernsback operas, and the Munsey fantasy. He even thinks that the latter two only printed "kid stuff". Why does he think this way? Because he has evolved with sf. At first there was a slight change in style—you couldn't even notice it. Another slight change, and still another, until at last it was completely different. He still doesn't notice the change because he has evolved with it.

But when he reads an old Gernsback novel—my, he thinks, what childish material. Did I actually like *that*? It's the same way with all types of life. You don't notice anything happen because it is so gradual. But after a number of years, you look back, and then you can notice the difference. It isn't that sf has grown up—it did, in a way—but that you also have grown up with it. So, in a sense, it hasn't grown up—it has evolved into a different style.

Fans that still like the Gernsback fiction aren't simple. They merely didn't evolve fast enough. They noticed the slight change, and they didn't like that change. And when fans laugh at you because you say you like the old fashioned sf, the old timers should laugh right back. The new fan hasn't taken any time out to analyze the situation. Maybe I'm wrong. But so far this is my theory, and no one has given me a better one. So I'll stick to it.

A good proof of my theory is A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER. Undoubtedly, fans liked it ten years ago. I liked it even now. It could have been better—much better. The characterization was weak, and in some places, the plot. But on the whole, if Kuttner could rewrite this, make it more dramatic, it could become a great sf novel. But you also must remember, Kuttner was just beginning sf then. He was a young writer—his style was sloppy, his characterization weak; all he had was plot. And, A MILLION YEARS TO CONQUER had a wonderful plot. One of the best I've read, and possibly, that was the only reason why I enjoyed it so much. Sam, you should have asked Kuttner to do a complete rewrite. It would have been great then!

I didn't enjoy the cover too much. It was too dark, and I couldn't make anything out. All I could gather was that the man was a miner.

Now for a plug for my zine, RENAISSANCE. It only costs one thin dime—but it will soon cost you fifteen cents, if you don't act soon. I need all the subs I can get, and I also need material. Recently I bought myself a large mimeo—I had been previously going small size, until I went co-editor for one issue, then I broke off—and it's the latest thing in mimeographs. It cost me \$160.00. And before I say any more, I'd like all my subs who didn't get Renaissance No. 4 to send me a card and stating how many issues you have coming. In

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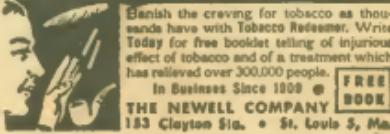
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my breakoff with the co-editor, I lost the subscription list. I have to remember my subs—I can't recall all of them.

Finlay, as usual, did a beautiful job. If only you could get a cover by him!—155-07 71st Ave., Flushing 67, N.Y.

You're a handy lad to have around, Joe, your impassioned rhetoric and imagination-jolting parables save me a lot of argument. To tell the truth I am getting the least bit weary of going around and around on this particular carousel. To us it seems a clear-cut job—there were plenty of good stories written in the old days which lots of people either missed or want to read again: we're glad to reprint them. But because a lot of them date very badly we pick and choose with care and we don't delude ourselves with any glorified memory versions. Amen.

COVERS AND SUCH by Robert P. Hoskins

Dear Sam: I just picked up the September FSM tonite. May I express my congratulations on your stepping-up of the schedule? Why don't you make TWS an every sixth week publication, like OW has been. It is the obvious solution when one cannot go monthly but does not wish to remain bi-monthly. There's just one mag I expect no change in and that's the Annual.

About a week ago I picked up my first battered copy of *Strange Stories*. There is a source of a great deal of excellent shorter material that you have overlooked in the past. And material from here would fit in well with the title of the mag.

I'd like to say now that I approve most heartily of the change in the covers of SS and TWS but am rather disappointed in FSM. It just doesn't present such a nice appearance.

Say Sam, do you plan to continue reprinting material from other mag sources? If so, there are several good novels from *Unknown* which have not been published in book form and which would fit in well with your title. I won't mention any specific titles with the exception of Cleve Cartmell's "A Bit of Tapestry," one of the best fantasies I've ever had the pleasure of reading.

Can I stick a little personal note in here? I'm disposing of all of my hard-cover books (about 60) and my p-b's. If anyone is interested, I'd appreciate it if they'd send a stamped self-addressed envelope for a list.

Also along in here I'd like to plug the ISFCC—one of the finest stf clubs now in existence. The water's fine; we're continually looking for new members. A lot of fun is had by all. For further information write either Ed Noble, Jr., Townline Road, R.D. #1, Erie, Pa., or myself, and they will receive all necessary info.

Incidentally, if there are still some doubting Thomases who think you and Bix are one and the same, may I say here that you are two of the friendliest gents I've ever had the pleasure of

meeting? I thoroughly enjoyed my visit to your offices several months ago.—*Lyons Falls, N.Y.*

Yes, we'll use stories from other sources now and then. We have such a huge backlog of our own that it may not be too often, but we certainly didn't have a monopoly on all the good stories written and there are plenty outside worth going after. Look for the announcements. The only people who think Bixby and I are the same also think we are Henry Kuttner and Aimee Semple McPherson. Bix just scraped his nose on the desk taking a bow.

FAITHFUL READER by Wally Parsons

Dear Sam: First star goes to Coppel's THE HUNTERS. If ever a story worked on the reader's emotions, that one did. I liked the contrast: robots come to the home of the "animals" that sent them to space. Great. But, since robots would build robots, not reproduce, how could Felti be a throwback? Isn't that a genetic phenomenon? Anyway, it isn't very important.

SECOND CHANCE, with an ironic, new twist, rates second. The Kuttner novel wasn't bad, but rates third. The rest were so-so. How about a Manning Draco novel by Crossen? (Did you miss the December TWS? Had a long Manning Draco—THE CAPHIAN CAPER—Ed.)

I have a point for Dave Hammond to sit on. Admittedly Sam does a better editing job than anyone else. But don't they work hard also? What's wrong with having house writers when they keep on their toes? And with so many mags on the market, an editor has to work to take the competitors. I read 17 different mags regularly and still I can't get them all here. No, all the mags

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aren't of equal quality, but just because one is outstanding doesn't mean the others are trash. Really, Hammond, where's your sense of proportion?

Sam, now that you're going bi-monthly, what will you do for a quarterly? Say, why not put out a new mag? (All right, I take it back!) (You better! — Ed.) Anyway, I hope the mag doesn't suffer. Lately I've found that FSM is getting better than SS if you don't count THE LOVERS in S. How about correcting this?

Is WONDER STORY ANNUAL still on the market? I can't find it anywhere. And I have a sneaking suspicion that you edit that mag. What about it? — 73 Sprucehill Road, Toronto 8, Ont.

Yep, we edit WONDER STORY ANNUAL too. And no wonder you couldn't find any on the stands. The last issue came out in December 1951—and a 1953 ANNUAL is on the way. Look for it, Wally, it's a dilly. It's got a much neglected Bradbury story in it that is one of the best he's ever done, and a genuine Mines, Modest, that's us.

Mind if we go now? There are more letters, long angry ones, long happy ones, short angry and happy ones, not to mention mixed-up and befuddled ones.

Ah, fandom. Philip Brantingham writes an impassioned missive, the gist of which is that female authors can't write. We suspect Mr. Brantingham's tongue is bulging out his cheek and he is merely looking for trouble, which he will get all right, so we don't take him too seriously. Norman Clarke wants the old, old, old stories and Paul covers instead of Bergey . . . John Rainey also caught the equilateral triangle gimmick in SECOND CHANCE . . . Jan Gardner is delighted to find FSM improving . . . Mike Stone, an old newspaper man, is grateful for some reading which is out of the beaten formula and commends Don Wilcox's ORPHAN OF SPACE . . . Ronald D. Rentz announces the formation of a FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION BOOK CLUB offering stf titles at a discount: the address is 130 Vera Street, West Hartford, 7, Connecticut.

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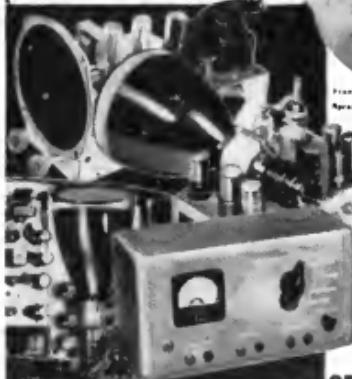
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